Register of the Women for Legislative Action Collection, 1952-1977

Collection number: MSS 010

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Los Angeles, California

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Title: Women for Legislative Action Collection,
Date (inclusive): 1952-1977
Collection number: MSS 010
Creator: Women for Legislative Action
Extent: 10 document cases
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Repository: Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.
Los Angeles, California
Language: English.

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Preferred Citation
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History
The Women for Legislative Action (WLA) was an independent, non-profit, non-partisan, inter-racial organization which began in 1951 and disbanded December 31, 1977. It was founded by a group of women who were not only interested in but wanted an active role in voicing their opinions and/or support for/against current issues and legislative processes at local, state, and national levels, as well as international affairs. This organization was dedicated to understand the legal jargon and complexities of bills and issues, to delegate what they felt the best course of action in handling them, and to inform the
During its lifetime the WLA grew in strength and numbers, boasting at one time of 1,000 members. The organization was made up of women from different ethnic and racial backgrounds and professions who came from all parts of Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley. Membership was open to all women.

Because of growing interests in a large area, it was necessary to divide the organization into chapters. The chapter was the basic structure of the WLA. There were four chapters--Los Angeles, Valley, Central (Los Angeles), and West (Los Angeles). The Los Angeles and Valley Chapters were further divided into day and evening sessions.

The function of the chapters was to hold monthly meetings and publish monthly bulletins which contained information on current legislation, chapter activities, and program plans. The chapter meetings frequently had guest speakers. The main basis of the chapter was the panel workshop which was made up of chapter members who studied and discussed pertinent issues and recommended action.

The officers of the chapters were elected by fellow members for a one year term and limited to three successive terms in one office. They consisted of a President; five Vice Presidents who were in charge of Organization, Legislative, Program, Ways and Means, and Membership; Recording Secretary; Corresponding Secretary; Dues Secretary; and Treasurer. Past officers included June White, Betty Willett, Eve Korn, Terry Kashmer, Julia Kagan, Raveli Soltes, Louise Bauers, Leah London, Thomacina Washington, Reva Grant, and Julia Sherman.

Dues were collected annually by the chapters and ranged from $3.00 (1952) to $6.00 (1977). The moneys collected provided for operating expenses such as printing the bulletins and rental space for each chapter.

The governing body of WLA was the Council. The Council coordinated the activities of WLA, deciding whether to cooperate with other organizations for non-partisan legislative, civic issues, or educational purposes on a temporary basis (WLA was not affiliated with any other organization). Council delegates the power of forming a new chapter if the group had 20 or more paid members. It set up conferences and panel workshops on current issues to which the general public was invited. The funds collected from such events were used to send chapter members to Washington D.C. and Sacramento to meet with officials; participate in legislative hearings on major bills and issues; and help other community organizations.

The Council members were elected by the total WLA membership for a one year term not to exceed three consecutive terms of one office. The officers of the Council included the President who not only presided over meetings but was the spokesman and sent communications and made public statements in the name of the organization, Organization Vice President, Legislative Vice President, Membership Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary. Other Council members included chapter presidents, Council chapter representatives, and panel coordinators who represented three areas--Community Affairs, Civil Liberties, and International Relations. Past presidents of the Council included Sylvia Miller (1952), Dorothy Marshall (1955), Doris Roth (1961-1963), Gussie Sitkin (1963-1965), Annette Cimring (1966-1969); other officers were Sylvia Goldberg, Sylvia Blankfort, Reva Grant, and Julia Sherman.

Other offices in WLA were the Executive Board and standing committees. The Executive Board consisted of all elected chapter officers, all chairmen of standing committees, their co-chairmen and secretaries, and others designated by the President. The standing committees consisted of a workshop panel committee concerned with legislation in civil liberties, international relations, and community affairs.

One of the major events held every year was the Annual Awards and Installation Luncheon. Usually held in June at well known hotels and restaurants, the luncheons were given top press coverage with prominent guests and recipients of the WLA award, the Statue of Liberty. The award was given to those people who had made outstanding contributions in the fields of legislation, communication, education, social welfare, civil liberties, human rights, and peace. Recipients of this award included Dr. Linus Pauling, Carl Sandburg, Assemblymen Mervyn Dymally and Augustus Hawkins, Martin Luther King Jr., Joan Baez, Dagmar Wilson, Dick Gregory, Dr. & Mrs. John Caughey, Dolores Huerta of the Farm Workers Union, and Makesha Tackett of the United Civil Rights. Also, newly elected officers of the Council and chapters were inducted.

In its 26 years of existence, WLA had witnessed or been a part of many events and issues of political, social, and moral concern on all levels--local, state, national, and international. The organization considered such issues as the Vietnam War; hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC); the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.; the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon; space flights; the crisis in the Middle East, Central America, South Africa; the Civil Rights movement; environmental awareness; the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty; disarmament talks with the Soviet Union; local school desegregation and busing issues; support for farm workers, and the problems of smog.

The results showed WLA's course of action in the form of letters to the President, government officials, private organizations; speeches; participation in demonstrations; and in visits to officials in Washington and Sacramento.

Also, they had a radio program on the Los Angeles Pacifica radio station, KPFK-FM, which discussed and alerted listeners about issues and bills.
Within the last 10 years of WLA, the group tried to rejuvenate the organization but was unsuccessful due to lack of members, lack of support, and lack of interest. Many of the original members had passed away, retired, or left for other reasons, leaving few to carry on. In 1977, it was decided to terminate the organization and whatever funds were left would be used to pay off the expenses and the rest given to other organizations. The remaining few formed a new group called Women on Issues adhering to most of WLA's ideals but operating mainly as a study group that continued to meet until the mid-1980's.

The track record of WLA indicated that they accomplished much in the 26 years and the results are shown in their activities in circumventing certain bills and issues such as the McCarran-Walter Act, the Dilworth Act, House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), wiretapping bills; cease fire in Vietnam; desegregation of the Los Angeles schools; and creation of projects like the National Health Program, child care centers, and more senior citizens' benefits.

What started out as a small group of women with high ideals snowballed into one of the largest women's activist organization in the nation. Their intent and determination proved that the WLA was not a social club, but one that was dedicated to preserving freedoms as stated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights; to understanding the complexities of laws, bills, issues and taking action; and to making the public aware of what was happening. The WLA had, as past recipient of WLA's award, Donna Allen, said, ...maturity and knowledge about issues and with persistence, their actions showed that people will listen and that changes can be made, corrected, or created.

**Scope and Content**

The Women for Legislative Action Collection (WLA) spans 25 years from 1952-1977 (no paperwork was found dated 1951). The collection, though not complete, gives a general overview of the organization's internal structure, constitution, statement of policy and platform, club activities and special events, financial statements, legislative reports, information on other organizations, and speeches. The bulk of the collection consists of the club's minutes, correspondence, and bulletins covering nearly the entire life of the organization. Documentation also includes reports, mimeographic material, newspaper clippings, handwritten notes, pamphlets, and photographs.

The papers are arranged in five series: ORGANIZATIONAL PAPERS, MINUTES, CORRESPONDENCE, BULLETINS, and SCRAPBOOK. The ORGANIZATIONAL PAPERS is divided into a general category and five sub-series: Administration, Financial Statements and Reports, Fund Raising, Publicity, and Reports and Speeches.

ORGANIZATIONAL PAPERS consists of a general file which includes fact sheets on certain bills and proposals; notes on a conference; newspaper clippings; a petition signed by WLA members to the Los Angeles Police Commission on racial tensions; letters from WLA on certain propositions; announcements from other organizations; and notes on a WLA trip to Sacramento in 1957. Also, there is a television script, Phone Call for Matthew Quade (1956) (it is unknown why it is in the collection); and general literature on radical women's groups.

The first sub-series Administration contains a list of officers and duties, the WLA constitution and revision, and a statement of purpose which gives a basic understanding of the inner-workings of WLA. The statement of policy shows only three years (1955,1961,1965) of WLA's position on international, national, state and community affairs. There is also a list of names of members and officers (1953,1955); two guidelines written by other organizations about legislative processes; and a Freedom Kit from a civil liberties workshop conference (1957) made up of fact sheets, speeches, programs, and pamphlets.

The second sub-series Financial Statement and Reports consists of financial statements showing the breakdown of cash receipts and disbursements of the Day Chapter and Council. There is also a schedule of contributions (1961-1962), a tentative Fiscal Year Budget (1955-1956), and a Financial Annual Report (1970-1971). These reports are incomplete in that each year is not accounted for nor are all chapters represented.

The third sub-series Fund Raising deals with WLA's various fundraising functions, specifically the annual luncheons and installations, An Evening with James Baldwin, and art shows and sales. There are photographs (8×10 black and white glossies) which show scenes from two luncheons--1961, with award winners Carl Sandburg and Rev. Eddie Currie and WLA members, and 1965, with WLA members and guest Frank Wilkinson.

From the luncheons, there are invitations, menus, letters to and from recipients, biographies of recipients, speeches, instruction to hostesses, programs and time schedule; from An Evening with James Baldwin which was a benefit for the victims of Orangeburg, S.C. (1968), a program, two letters of donation from WLA, and a short biography of Baldwin; and from the art show and sale a list of artists, letters to artists, entry blanks, copy of agreement between WLA and artist guild, copy of permit, program, and newspaper clipping.

The fourth sub-series Publicity consists of newspaper clippings, press releases, announcements and printed material (fact sheets, pamphlets) on WLA members, club activities and functions, guest speakers, and issues. The press releases (most were contributed by Sylvia Blankfort, WLA officer) were taken from notes (handwritten and typed) or copies of WLA's minutes.
The fifth sub-series Reports and Speeches consists of an array of materials the Los Angeles Board of Education (BoFE) 1964-1972. The WLA was interested in school issues such as integration, busing, rights of teachers, salaries, and teachers’ strikes. There are publications, speeches, letters, questionnaires on integration of schools by such groups as the United Civil Rights (UCR) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); letters to/from Gov. Ronald Reagan and California School Superintendent Wilson Riles; speeches by WLA to the BoFE; published material on certain school propositions; and two Los Angeles school district maps (1966). There are also notes (handwritten and typed) by WLA members on their trips to Washington D.C. covering objectives, agenda, reaction to the Congressmen they visited; legislative action reports in the form of fact sheets and bulletins on various issues, bills, propositions, and amendments on state, local, national, international levels; and statements recommending action to be taken (usually writing letters or voting). Like legislative action reports, memoranda from legislative coordinators discussed certain issues or bills and recommended actions, but differed in that there was a group consensus as to which were to merit action in WLA’s name. The speeches were made by WLA members at luncheons, the BoFE, and club meetings; before commissions and on radio station KPFK.

The series MINUTES is comprised of minutes from Board Meetings, Membership, Executive Board, and Council. The Board Meeting minutes and Executive Board minutes are categorized according to different chapters. The Los Angeles Chapter Board Meeting minutes (1954-1975) and Council minutes (1955-1977) cover more years than the other minutes. Basically, the minutes contain reports from various officers dealing with current issues and problems.

The series CORRESPONDENCE consists of telegrams, night letters, letters (original and copies) and note cards. Topics covered dealt with current issues such as protests against the Vietnam War, the draft, nuclear testing; discrimination in education, employment; the Civil Rights movement; supported or opposed measures, bills, appointments; congratulatory and informal notes. Some of the people to whom WLA sent or received letters include Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson (the replies were in the form of notecards with no signature or letters signed by special assistants); government officials such as Senators Richard Richards, Alan Cranston, Hubert Humphrey, Thomas Kuchel, Edward and Robert Kennedy, Clair Engle, Birch Bayh, George McGovern, Frank Church; Congressmen James Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey, Thomas Bradley, Rosalind Wyman, Ernest Debs; Assemblymen Mervyn Dymally, Thomas Doyle, Augustus Hawkins; other people and organizations such as Cesar Chavez, Frank Wilkinson, CORE, University of California President Clark Kerr; and television stations KNXT, KCET, NBC, and ABC. The most letters written and received were under WLA presidents Doris Roth (1961-1963), Gussie Sitkin (1963-1965), and Annette Cimring (1966-1969).

The series BULLETINS is sorted by different club chapters and day and evening sessions. The earliest bulletins were labeled under one heading, Los Angeles Chapter (1952-1955), then were later divided into respective chapters. The last bulletins (1970-1977) were consolidated into one as membership dropped and some chapters were dissolved. The bulletins were basically the same in content covering activities, guest speakers, international, national, state and local issues, civil liberties, education, health and welfare, editorial, calendar of events, agenda of other chapters, proposals and recommendations, and miscellaneous notices.

The last series SCRAPBOOK contains mementos, newspaper clippings, notes, photographs, speeches, and letters mainly from the WLA’s luncheons. The mementos include luncheon invitations, programs, guest lists, hostess ribbon; photographs from luncheons, march in Washington D.C. (1963) and peace march in San Francisco (1967); newspaper clippings of the luncheons, Carl Sandburg, WLA members and obituaries of members; speeches from luncheons and a eulogy for a WLA member; a membership card and pamphlets about WLA, and also a Christmas card from Coretta Scott King and her family. It is unknown who put the scrapbook together.

Though incomplete, the collection provides considerable information on how WLA operated through most of its twenty-five year history.

ORGANIZATIONAL PAPERS

| Box 1, Folder 1 | General File. 1954-1970, Nds. |
| Box 1, Folder 2 | Television Script, Phone Call For Matthew Quade for Chrysler Corp. June 22, 1956. |
| Box 1, Folder 3 | General Literature of Radical Women Groups. 1967-1973, Nds. |
| Box 1, Folder 5 | WLA Officers and Duties. 1965, Nds. |
| Box 1, Folder 6 | Central Chapter General Literature. 1961-1964, 1970. |
| Box 1, Folder 7 | WLA’s Constitution and Statement of Purpose. 1969, Nds. |
| Box 1, Folder 9 | Conference Freedom Kit. March 2, 1957. |

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Financial Statements and Reports:
Box 1, Folder 10
Box 1, Folder 11

Fund Raising:
Box 2, Folder 1
Box 2, Folder 2-7
Box 2, Folder 8
Box 2, Folder 9

Publicity:
Box 2, Folder 10-11

Box 3, Folder 1
Box 3, Folder 2

Reports and Speeches:
Box 3, Folder 3
Board of Education. 1963-1972.
Box 3, Folder 4-6
Box 3, Folder 7
Legislative Action Reports. 1964-1970.
Box 3, Folder 8
Box 3, Folder 9
Inter-Organization Communication. 1959-1972, Nds.
Box 3, Folder 10
Box 3, Folder 11

MINUTES
Box 4, Folder 1-3
Box 4, Folder 4
Board Meeting West Chapter. 1965-1966.
Box 4, Folder 5
Box 4, Folder 6
Box 4, Folder 7
Box 4, Folder 8
Box 5, Folder 1
Executive Board Valley Chapter. 1964-1967.
Box 5, Folder 2-4

CORRESPONDENCE
Box 5, Folder 5
Box 5, Folder 6-7
Correspondence Sent:
1954-1962.
Box 6, Folder 3-6
Correspondence Received:
1960-1962.
1963.
1964.

BULLETINS
Box 7, Folder 3
Los Angeles Chapter. 1952-1959.
Box 7, Folder 4-5
Box 8, Folder 1
Box 8, Folder 2-3
Box 8, Folder 4
Los Angeles West Chapter. 1965-1969.
Box 8, Folder 5
Box 9, Folder 1
Box 9, Folder 2
Box 9, Folder 3-4