

Herstory

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Last Thursday afternoon, some of the most powerful women in Santa Barbara trickled through the door at the Orfalea Foundation's downtown location, dressed in their best business casual outfits as was requested on the invitation. They grabbed a few slices from the international-cheese platters and glasses of rosemary lemonade or ginger peach tea, and made their way around the room, greeting each other like old friends.

Although the mood was light, there was a palpable sense of expectation in the air. Gloria Steinem was in the house, the feminist icon and author whose efforts helped indirectly pave the way for many of these women's successes. The Orfalea Foundation had invited a bevy of Santa Barbara's fiercest females to participate in the private Q&A session with Steinem, before she headed over to the Arlington Theatre that evening to speak as a guest of the UCSB Arts & Lecture series.

There was Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara), sitting in an aisle seat just across from District Attorney Joyce Dudley, who was a row behind County Supervisor Janet Wolf and *Pacific Coast Business Times* Publisher Linda LeBrock. SAGE Publications co-founder Sara Miller McCune [full disclosure: the Miller McCune Center is *Mission and State's* publisher] sat in the front, with Santa Barbara Mayor Helene Schneider nearby.

Steinem stepped to the front to speak, wearing her trademark uniform: black top, a low-slung belt dotted with studs and streaked hair a la Audrey Hepburn's character in *Breakfast At Tiffany's*. Today, at 79 years old, one of the most recognized faces of the '60s and '70s women's liberation movement still very much resembles her younger self, when she was often photographed leading marches or peering out through her transparent aviators from behind her desk at *Ms. Magazine*, which she founded and edited for 15 years. There she was *right here in the room*, evoking 30 years of feminism. The audience was rapt.

Among the first topics of discussion was the worry that today's generation of young women lacked their own Steinem figure to rally the battle cry. Audible sounds of agreement emanated from the audience, and someone mumbled "Miley Cyrus."

"We all have spokespeople for our generation," she told the group, pointing out that there are now more prominent female leaders than there were in her day. When asked her opinion about why young women seem to eschew the "feminist" label, Steinem said, "They would identify if they understood what it means," citing a 2012 election survey in which 68 percent of women agreed with the definition of feminism, but not the term.

The concern that young women are not aware of the history of feminism or how much women's rights have changed over just a few decades weighed on the minds of many in the audience. One woman teared up as she recounted how her female student assistant had turned down her invitation to see Steinem talk later that evening, and how disappointed she felt that the assistant didn't comprehend the magnitude of her work. Another expressed concern that only one of her three daughters seemed proud to call herself a feminist.

Throughout the discussion, there was a theme that kept being reiterated: Complacency would end the revolution. This sentiment was underscored by a glossy handout the Orfalea Foundation had placed on every seat with compiled statistics on how women still remain unequal to their male counterparts in Santa Barbara County. "[Not Yet Equal: A Snapshot of Women in Santa Barbara County 2014](#) ^[1]," showed that "less than one-third of elected officials in the county are women, despite a 54-percent majority female voting force." And according to the U.S. Census Bureau, "women in Santa Barbara County comprise 39 percent of the workforce but earn only 81 cents for every dollar a man earns"—just a tiny step up from the 77-cent national average.

How, then, the women asked, could they make their children and other young women understand the importance of keeping up the fight?

Steinem told the group, “[Young women] are mad as hell about their own issues. They are graduating in debt, and that wasn’t true for most of us of our generation. And they’re well aware that they’re going to make \$1 million to \$2 million less to pay that debt because of sex discrimination. They know that. They’re mad,” she said.

Also, she said, young people shouldn’t be seen as the only members of the revolution. Women tend become more radicalized as they get older, losing power as wives or mothers. “I always have this vision of millions of gray-haired women taking over the Earth,” she said.

The Q&A session was cut short for photo opps with Steinem, and some even managed to squeeze in a quick hug of gratitude and a handshake before the photographer’s flash went off. In one part of the room, Jackson and Schneider were standing together with bowed heads, perhaps planning a new way to promote women’s issues in the county. Some clustered near the cheese plate to trade ideas, and a few walked out together, rehashing their favorite topics of the conversation.

Later that evening at the Arlington Theatre, Steinem would tell the 2,000 people in the room that she secretly hoped her talk would inspire an organizing meeting right then and there.

Clearly, she already had succeeded once that day.

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[1] Not Yet Equal: A Snapshot of Women in Santa Barbara County 2014:

<http://www.missionandstate.org/departments/civics-center/yes-equal-snapshot-women-santa-barbara-county-2014/>