



Band of Sisters

How We Began, Where We Are Now

All of us living here in the Lowcountry love its natural beauty, pristine beaches, thriving wildlife, palm trees and pines. It's a slice of paradise...except for the politics.

As Liberal Ladies, many of us find that our values and beliefs are out of sync with those of our conservative community. Express an opinion about race relations, politics, or social justice at a dinner party or golf game, and watch the room go silent. Let it slip that you're a Democrat, and you may get a raised eyebrow or a quizzical look.

Not content to be the ‘odd women out,’ four women took action.



The four founding members of Liberal Ladies: Jeri Greenfield, Lynn Ovelman, Peggy Walczak, and Loretta Robinson

Ten years ago, Jeri Greenfield, Lynn Ovelman, Loretta Robinson, and Peggy Walczak invited a small group of liberal-minded women for lunch. The invitation said, “Let’s meet to share information and discuss the current political situation and events with women who lean toward the liberal side of politics.” That was the beginning of Liberal Ladies of the Lowcountry.



This November, LLL celebrates its 10th anniversary. From that tiny group, we’re now a force to be reckoned with, at almost 500 members strong. How have we come so far? Here, the four founders and other longtime members share stories about LLL’s history and impressive growth.

“It all began with that first email from Lynn Ovelman,” says Jeri Greenfield. “The best part was, she added a disclaimer saying if you’re not on the same page, simply

disregard this email. Six to eight women attended our first lunch. There are a couple of others who said they were there, but they may not have been. It doesn't matter, because the idea of getting together monthly took off."

At the time, Barack Obama, the country's first African-American president, was a focal point for public opinion, both positive and negative. Those holding liberal views often found themselves in the minority.

**“Being a newcomer here,
I felt isolated, afraid to talk—like
I was in the closet”**

– Loretta Robinson



Through the years, the Liberal Ladies have come together at networking luncheons, cocktail parties, tennis, golf, small group meetings, and other events, occasionally with their spouses. Once a year, they meet jointly with Liberal Men of the Lowcountry.

“Being a newcomer here, I felt isolated, afraid to talk—like I was in the closet,” says Loretta Robinson. At a women's club meeting in Hilton Head, she was asked to introduce herself. “I said I formerly worked on Capitol Hill, adding that I'd been press secretary to four members of the House of Representatives. Someone called out, ‘What party?’ Knowing it was a conservative group, I demurred, and another person said, ‘Oh, you must be a Democrat.’”

That first luncheon provided a place to talk openly without fear of repercussions. “We did not see ourselves as a political group, but rather a group of women who could just speak freely on the issues we valued,” says Jeri Greenfield. “We agreed to call ourselves Liberal Ladies of the Lowcountry and

suddenly we had an organization.” While politics was certainly on the agenda, the Liberal Ladies agreed to steer clear of partisan politics, a philosophy still held today.



Donna Morris, Jansen Jewell, Tom and Lynn Cordy (current Steering Committee chair), Chris Hess, and Cathy Adams

Energized by the success of that first lunch, a second one was planned for the following month. Another email went out to a larger group of women. It ended with an upbeat observation: “With all of our political problems, we still live in the best country.”

The monthly luncheons grew larger, the group meeting in local restaurants: Truffles, Chart House (now Dockside), and Frankie Bones. “We’d sit in the back room and try to speak quietly so people couldn’t overhear us,” recalls longtime member Diane Polevoy.

By 2013 the group had grown to 100 members.

“Seeking new people and fresh ideas, we started putting short blurbs in the local newspaper: Please join us at the next LLL meeting,” says Peggy Walczak. “As we attracted new members, they brought in other people.”

“At the time we were very low-key and informal,” adds longtime member Ellen Muhl. “A bit chaotic too. When it came time to pay for lunch, we never seemed to have enough money. We knew we needed to get organized, so we formed a Steering Committee. I served as first treasurer.”

By 2013 the group had grown to 100 members. Meetings moved to larger venues, including the Golf Club at Indigo Run and later, the Country Club of Hilton Head. By-laws and annual dues were instituted, the membership list became an Excel spread sheet, and the finances and payment processes were organized and streamlined.

“...I knew then that we were becoming a force.”

– Jeri Greenfield

The Steering Committee began inviting speakers. “Senator Tom Davis was the first,” says Ellen Muhl. “He accepted our invitation immediately. I remember one of us asking, ‘Who’s paying for his lunch?’” South Carolina politician Ginny Deerin was another speaker. “She stayed overnight at my house,” adds Muhl. “Like I said, things were very informal back then.”

“When Senator Tom Davis came to speak to us, and also the mayor of Hilton Head, I knew then that we were becoming a force,” says Jeri Greenfield.



In 2014 longtime member Cathy Nairne had a cocktail party at her home for members and their spouses. Among the guests were Barbara Hammes and her husband Richard. Before the evening was over, Richard announced he was starting a men’s spin-off: Liberal Men of the Lowcountry. Later that year, the first joint meeting of Liberal Ladies and Liberal Men was held.

Speakers were liberal candidates for Governor and State Representative. This joint meeting has since become an annual event.

2015 was a year of many firsts for LLL. The first issue of the newsletter *Connections* was published, edited by communications coordinator Barbara Hammes. She also assumed the tasks of scheduling luncheon venues, arranging menus and handling reservations. “Before we had an off-site server for all LLL communications, my home system crashed twice!” she says.

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“People who didn’t realize we existed were now aware of us,” notes Barbara Hammes. “We could all express our true feelings and stop talking into our sleeves in locker rooms and restaurants.”

Through the years, topics of discussion have included ecology, gun control, immigration law, the Supreme

Liberal Ladies made cameo appearances in the biopic “The Glorias.” This scene from the film recreates the 1977 National Women’s Conference.





On the set of "The Glorias," left to right: Julianne Moore as Gloria Steinem and Bette Midler as Bella Abzug.



Liberal Lady Sharron Sypult with iconic feminist Gloria Steinem at Davidson College (the real Gloria, not Julianne Moore).

Court, white fragility, women's rights issues, and much more. A highlight from last year was participating in the filming of the biopic "The Glorias," the story of how Gloria Steinem's childhood influenced her life as a writer and women's rights activist. Several Liberal Ladies traveled to Savannah to appear in the film as extras.

LLL's able leadership has included Steering Committee chairs Peggy



Walczak (2015), Carolyn Shamlin (2016–2017), Barbara Hammes (2018), Lynn Cordy (2019–2020), and Minerva Castro Hernandez (2021). All agree that running an organization such as this one is no easy task, with logistics and finances to manage and events to plan. "The growth of LLL through the years has been supported by the many volunteers—too many to name—who have done a wonderful job serving on the Steering Committee," says chair Lynn Cordy.

"Approaching our 10th anniversary, we all wanted to have a celebration luncheon with birthday cake and a

A SALUTE TO THE STEERING COMMITTEE

Many women have contributed their time and talents, and helped LLL grow and thrive, by serving on the Steering Committee: providing oversight and leadership, planning events, arranging for speakers, managing communications and finances, maintaining the database and website, and so much more. Here is a list of those volunteers, including our newest members who will serve in 2021. (We hope it is a complete list, but in the early days, our record keeping was not as efficient as it is now. If we have left anyone out, it was inadvertent, and we apologize.)

Gail Bottoms
Minerva Castro Hernandez
Nancy Contel
Lynn Cordy
Penny Cron
Ann Durrin
Florry Gibbes
Lavonne Hales
Barbara Hammes
Tricia Higgins
Suzi Huisman
Maureen Korzik
Myla Lerner
Mary Ann Littell
Lauri Mitchell
Linda Moniuszko
Donna Morris
Ellen Muhl
Maxine Parsons-Kogut
Judy Pizzuti
Diane Polevoy
Cathy Savage
Carolyn Shamlin
Linda Sheets
Susan Sigalow
Megan Sisson
Peggy Walczak
Mary Wilcox
Randie Wolfe
Barbara Ulrich

very fun time,” she continues. “Well, Covid-19 had other plans.” In the face of the pandemic, the Steering Committee has the challenge of re-imagining an organization that’s structured around monthly luncheon-and-speaker meetings, with plenty of networking. For now, the meeting venue is Zoom presentations. Most recently, guest speaker Jaime Harrison, Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, shared his thoughts and goals and patiently answered our questions.

With the current political climate, there is no shortage of issues to discuss and causes to take on. No one knows what the world will be like in a year. What we do know is that Liberal Ladies will continue to share information and learn from each other to effect change.

“It’s amazing to think how quickly 10 years went by. Those emails tell the whole story of how quickly we grew,” says Jeri Greenfield. “What we heard over and over from new members was, ‘I thought I was the only one.’ Happy Anniversary to us!”

