

Orange, Durham, Chatham AAUW President's Message September 2017

Mary Monroe Kolek, Ph.D.

Living with FIW Syndrome: Why American Association of Women can help us cope with a variety of life transitions

FIWS: It's a condition we don't talk about much in public. Whether due to embarrassment or because we have been raised to adhere to a code of modesty and selflessness, rarely is the condition of **Formerly Influential Woman Syndrome** broached — even among sufferers. Neither is it something our mothers (or mentors) warned us about. Yet **FIWS** is a condition that effects women across roles, professions, generations and locales.

In an age characterized by constant change, many women cope with **FIWS**, the waves of disorientation and sadness that follow the loss of a role that carried influence and reflected hard earned expertise and experience. When you are used to being the person others come to for leadership, guidance and assurance, not knowing how to respond to your own loss of identity is unnerving.

Reconciling who you used to be —who you are *used* to being— and creating and embracing a “new you” is a challenge no matter the circumstances. Even if the decision to change roles was made consciously and conscientiously- in good faith and with much anticipation- the impact of losing one's *professional* identity and peer group should not be underestimated (and if a long distance move is involved, the loss of one's *personal* identity and friendship circle exacerbates the experience of loss.) Add to this the well-meaning expectations of others conveyed at farewell parties, showers and graduations:

“Oh you must be so thrilled to finally be retired and to not have some place you have to be”... “What a relief to not have to get dressed for the office, after all your baby doesn't expect you to get dressed”... “How excited you must be for your spouse- it is so selfless that you are willing to give up your job for this move, are you planning to look for a new position once you are settled?...”Now that the last one is out of the house what are you going to do with yourself?”...“I know being downsized is hard but you must be relieved to be rid of that boss!”...“Is it lonely now that you are working from home?”

Connecting over Formerly Influential Woman Syndrome

The American Association of Women is well situated to serve and support women transitioning to new roles, new locations and new life stages.

<http://www.aauw.org/what-we-do/>

— and it is not surprising that **FIWS** often goes unmentioned and unaddressed. Who wants to sound like “Debby Downer” in the face of such optimism? It is no wonder we often stay quiet or even chastise ourselves for our ill content.

Yet, listen carefully to women gathering in book clubs, in fitness classes, at coffee shops, in “mommy groups” and across social media platforms and the telltale signs of **FIWS** slip into the conversation:

I used to be...someone people listened to, an expert, someone with influence; I used to be... in charge, seen as an authority, someone with credibility; I used to... walk with confidence...people used to know my name...people used to call me...people used to need me...people used to respect me.

And now—now what?

Even if not asked directly, this question often hangs in the air.

Finding ways to address **FIWS** seems particularly germane in an area such as the Triangle, which is growing exponentially due to families relocating for opportunity and because of an influx of energetic retirees. Across our community women from a variety of demographic groups find themselves grappling with how to begin anew. Until recently they used to be “somebody” and now they are “back to square one”- trying to either reestablish themselves as competent and credible in a chosen field or “starting over” in a role, profession or organization in which they have no established track record. Often they are new to the area and have no local professional network or friends to call upon. **And that, Orange, Durham, Chatham AAUW, is our cue.**

The mission of the American Association of University Women is to support women as they strive to use their talents to actualize their dreams and contribute to their profession and community. Given our resources we are in a unique position to open up the conversation about the phenomena of **Formerly Influential Woman Syndrome** and how to cope with its effects. We just need to find a way to connect with women interested looking for resources and a network to help them advance their studies, personal and professional influence and advocacy and mentoring skills.

And that is where *you* can be of help.

How? If you are a current member you can collaborate with others to address the following questions. If you are a prospective member you can offer insights that will influence the answers and our future work.

- **How can the ODC AAUW reach out to women who are transitioning roles and beginning new chapters- personal and professional- to help them with challenges of settling into a new “self” and finding ways to use and expand personal power and influence?**

- **How can our programs and social media sites engage and serve a multigenerational group who are looking to find new roles, new social and professional relationships and new opportunities in Orange, Durham and Chatham?**

Be it through on line information and education, scholarships, local programs or fellowship, the AAUW of Orange, Durham and Chatham hopes to help women continue to be influential as they transition throughout life roles and stages. We are planning on hosting an event dedicated to this topic sometime this fall and to that end need your input.

I invite our current members and anyone reading this article for whom the content resonates to share insights, information and ideas, either through email (odcaauw1718@gmail.com), social media or in person at a monthly AAUW meeting. Our first of the season is September 16, 10:30 at the Chapel Hill Library. We will be discussing goals and plans for the upcoming year.

For information on AAUW please visit: www.chapelhill-nc.net or follow AAUW of North Carolina on Facebook.