

## Focusing On Our Branch

Our October 15 meeting will be focused on us, our branch. Entitled “Futures Planning: AAUW-ODC Counties,” we will examine our current status, where we want to go (our goals) and come up with an action plan or activities to achieve our goals.

Our branch, throughout the years, has worked to explore issues (particularly regarding women and girls but not exclusively) and inform its members--and the public--on relevant subjects. Our September speaker, Ferrel Guillory, analyzed NC politics citing long range trends and data. The audience, most of which were members, listened attentively, added to his comments, and asked questions concerning demographics and voting trends. By all appearances, our members were engaged and interested. In addition to good programming, through the years our branch took on outreach programs to benefit the community. AAUW-CH was instrumental in starting a Children’s Library in Chapel Hill as well as equipping the fledgling Chapel Hill Public Library. We sponsored writing contests and provided Art Kits for the public school classrooms and the library. Members provided college catalogues for the high schools. Some of our members were politically active and ran for Town Council and School Board. More recently, Kay White and other members put together STEM programs for middle school girls. And, in addition to contributing to AAUW national’s 3.5 million plus dollars given out each year, we support our own scholarship, the Schwenning, which has been given to a female graduate student at UNC-CH in some form since 1928.

After World War II, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers, and liked the fulfillment and independence it afforded them personally as well as the advantages it gave their families. As a result, membership numbers have decreased over the past decades. We can attribute our declining numbers in part to our success—careers have opened up for women and opportunities are increasing even as our organization steadily works to equalize the playing field. However, our declining numbers also reflect national trends. An act of Congress created the American Legion Post in 1919 which “spearheaded the original GI Bill for veterans returning from World War II in the 1940’s” but it too has struggled with declining membership nationally. ([www.masslive.com/news/2013/07/](http://www.masslive.com/news/2013/07/)) Even an act of Congress can’t beat the trend! Robert D. Putnam, in his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, “said that attending club meetings, such as those held by Rotary and Kiwanis groups, has declined by 58 percent in the past 25 years.” (Linda May, Journal Register Newspapers, 12/26/2012)

This statistic does not mean that these groups haven’t, in spite of declining membership, still managed to contribute to their communities, the nation, and the world at large. The Lions’ SightFirst, a global program aimed at restoring sight and preventing blindness has raised more than \$346 million since 1990. The Kiwanis’ have raised more than \$100 million to wipe out maternal and neonatal tetanus worldwide. Rotary International spent billions of dollars to

eliminate polio from the earth, a goal that has been nearly accomplished. (Linda May) AAUW national will provide 3.7 million in scholarships this year alone to women—since 1996, our members have given over 60 million in scholarships through the national organization and even more through local endowments. It is a laudable achievement!

So, our branch is at a crossroads. Our membership numbers are less than they once were. We must decide what is feasible and what isn't, what the few can do for the many. Bearing in mind that people (young and old) are most comfortable with "episodic" volunteerism with specific goals, and that retention rates are down in most organizations, we must reassess and reinvent. I hope all of you will come to our October 15 meeting, starting at 10:30 in room B of the Chapel Hill Public Library. Michele, Donna and I look forward to our discussion and are counting on your leadership and input!