

As Director of the Kentucky Foundation for Women, my first thought about participating in the RFK Performance Project was to find someone among Kennedy's entourage with feminist leanings and "play the part" of that person. Although I am the product of strong women ancestors from Appalachia, I am sorry to say that it did not occur to me that the persons with feminist leanings would be the local women who testified before Kennedy's ad hoc hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty. But there they were.

At Vortex, Mrs. Viola Holland told of the transportation needs of children living up the hollers who couldn't get to school. Mrs. Nancy Cole talked about the needs for decent jobs so her sons could find work, telling the Senator that "the people here are not sorry," and they wanted to work. Mrs. Betty Terrill explained how paying for food stamps (yes, poor people used to have to pay for food stamps) left her no money to buy books for her children's education so they might have to quit school. Mary Rice Farris asked the Senator why the U.S. government was spending millions of dollars on a war abroad when people were hungry here; and why "American Negroes had to fight in Viet Nam," but they couldn't find jobs at home.

During the hearings at Neon, Mrs. Lynn Frazier described her work as a Public Health Nurse, detailing the needs for better maternal and infant care with great care and precision. She argued eloquently for the importance of improving the nutritional status of children as a key to their long term development. Mrs. Pat Gish, co-owner of the MOUNTAIN EAGLE and a housing resource developer, researched the U.S. Department of Agriculture food stamp guidelines and concluded matter of factly that the USDA evidently "believes that the poorer you are the less you are entitled to eat." Gish reported that it was impossible to purchase the minimum food requirements set by the USDA on the amount of food stamps allotted to a family of eight by the USDA. Cutting to the quick, Gish calmly pointed out how this affected poor children most.

As a contemporary feminist, I am well aware that when it came to the political rallies, the official welcomes, and the promises for improvements, the women were behind the scenes and the players were all men. Yet in RFK's day, those men, Congressman Carl Perkins, Appalachian advocate Harry Caudill, and the Senator himself, cared about good schools, decent jobs, and proper nutrition, just like the women did. Over and over, Senator Kennedy said the conditions he saw were "unacceptable" and "intolerable" in a country of such great wealth.

Holding up this historical mirror to today, I had to ask why the women's movement and political priorities have changed so much since then. In 1968, I was a junior in college. The next year I graduated and soon after got married, like all "good girls" were expected to do. But in the 1970s when I became a card carrying feminist, I wanted better jobs for women and equal pay. These are worthy causes that I stand by today, but somehow during those years, some

women and some issues got “lost” in the urban-based feminism focusing on the work place. We didn’t listen enough to the women who wanted to stay home and take care of children and old people, and the women who wanted to stand by their man. We didn’t listen enough to rural women who raised their gardens, and canned their food, and worked hard for no pay to get books and good schools for their kids. Maybe when women stopped listening to other women, the male politicians stopped listening, too.

I went to eastern Kentucky to learn about what RFK said and did about the poverty programs in 1968, but instead I learned about me and my philosophy about feminism today. Feminists today need to reclaim the history of these strong women who worked at home, and like them, we must continue to fight for a better life for all people,

Judy Jennings