

The Origins of The Women's Place at The Ohio State University

by Dr. Deborah Ballam

Everything is a product of what went before it and thus the origins of The Women's Place must be traced back to the origins of the university itself. Ohio State was founded in 1870 as an institution of higher learning. When the first group was invited to apply, several women were among the applicants. The Board of Trustees held a special meeting to determine whether it was appropriate to admit women. Apparently, no prior thought had been given to the possibility that the university would educate women. The trustees decided women could be admitted. However, their admission did not change the fact that the university had been set up to meet the needs of men. Thus began a struggle that continues to this day to reshape the university to accommodate change to meet the needs of women equally with the needs of men. All my knowledge of those struggles is contained in the Pathbreaking Women document that can be found on The Women's Place website. I refer you there for more details.

Women Faculty Fisher College of Business

My personal knowledge of the events that led to the creation of The Women's Place began in 1987 when Dr. Arnon Reichers, an assistant professor in the Department of Management and Human Resources in the College of Business, knocked on my office door. I was in the second year on the tenure track in the Finance Department in the College of Business, one of only two women in the department, both untenured. I had joined the department five years earlier. My first three years were in the status of a lecturer. I did not know Dr. Reichers or any of the other women faculty in the college other than the woman in my department. She introduced herself and indicated that she and some of the other women faculty—there were only 16 in the entire college which was about 15% of the faculty—were planning to meet to discuss the conditions for women in the college and inquired about my interest in such a meeting. I practically jumped out of my chair exclaiming “Most definitely Yes!”

All 16 women faculty were persuaded to meet. Only a handful of the 16 were tenured. The subject of our first meeting was the review of a 1999 article by Bernice Sandler, “The Chilly Climate: Subtle Ways in which Women are Treated Differently at Work and in Classrooms.” At that time, Sandler was a Senior Scholar in Residence at the Women's Research and Education Institute. Her work outlined and codified the systematic behaviors that created a climate in which women were not able to be as successful as men. We spent the next six months meeting and developing a chilly climate report for The College of Business. We developed many specific examples of actual incidences in the college and grouped them by category with explanations for each category. The issues on which we focused were lack of women in leadership positions, salary inequity, inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and sexual harassment.

We did not identify any participants and we deleted any specifics that could lead to identifying the male actors in the example. We wanted the document to be used as a starting point for making change and

did not want to attack specific men for fear that would be detrimental to meaningful discussions. When we finalized the report, the issue then became whether all of the women faculty in the College of Business would sign it. If any refused, we feared it would weaken the report to the point it would be totally undermined. Most were still untenured and the fear of retaliation was high. In the end, however, every woman did sign. That, in itself, was empowering.

In 1988, we presented the report to the dean, Justin Davidson. We learned later that after he read it, his first response was to call Dr. Carole Anderson, then Dean of the new College of Nursing and later a vice provost. In telling her about the report, he said "These men here are a bunch of animals! What in the world am I going to do?" Carole suggested he turn it over to Dr. Sue Blanchan who was head of an equity office that President Ed Jennings had created a year or so earlier to deal with all kinds of equity issues without tying the work to an institutional agenda or mission. The dean did that and he also released the report to the faculty as a whole. You can only imagine the uproar that ensued. Men were running around asking if they were in any of the incidents, attacking the women for being too sensitive, and generally denying there were any problems.

Sue Blanchan met with the women faculty in the business college and we discussed various approaches. Over the next year, Sue tried all kinds of things. One of the first things she did was to come to a college faculty meeting to discuss the report. When she was introduced, a large number of the male faculty stood up in unison and left the meeting. This was typical of the way in which her efforts were met. Sue's ineffectiveness was not her fault. While the position reported to the president, it was not aligned with any agreed upon institutional agenda and, thus, she had no power and no ability to affect change. Consequently, the dean clearly was not willing to take any meaningful action. We later realized that offices designed to "fix problems" are marginalized and rendered ineffective without institutional and leadership alignment with the effort.

After a year of trying, Sue asked to meet with us. To this day, I clearly remember her words. She told us, "My efforts have not yielded any results. I don't know what else to try. I have to give up. I am sorry. I know it is bad for you in this college. I think it is worse for you than for other women at the university, but I don't know what else I can do."

The women's grassroots network

After Sue Blanchan left the meeting with the women faculty in the business college, the group talked about the situation. Our rage was palpable. We felt abandoned by the university. We felt we could not simply give up. All of us knew at least one other woman faculty member in another part of the university and we actually thought the climate was as bad in other places as it was in our college. But, we didn't know for sure. At that point, we decided since most of us knew at least one woman faculty member in the College of Social & Behavioral Sciences, we would write to all of the women in SBS inviting them to meet us for lunch at the Faculty Club. We included a copy of our chilly climate report and indicated the agenda was to discuss the climate in their college. With few exceptions, the women faculty responded with great enthusiasm and either came or, if they had a conflict, asked us to keep them informed.

We met in one of the private dining rooms in the Faculty Club. When you entered the building, the events in each private dining room were posted on a board at the front so that participants would know which dining room was hosting their event. We simply posted "College of Business Women Faculty."

At that lunch we discovered that the women faculty in Social & Behavioral Sciences felt the climate was every bit as concerning as it was in our college. After much discussion, we decided the next step was to ask women from a couple of other colleges to meet with us so that we could determine how widespread the climate problems existed. We also invited any interested women from Social & Behavioral to attend the next lunch. Several did. We had the next lunch a month later.

The colleges we invited next were Engineering and Agriculture. Because those colleges had so few women, we invited both to the same lunch. Again, we sent the chilly climate report, indicated we had met with women in Social & Behavioral Sciences and that we would like to discuss with them their climate. Again, we were met with great enthusiasm. We held the lunch in the Faculty Club and the board at the front announced us. The result of this lunch was we decided we should take the time to meet with all women faculty at the university. At that time, it was less than 1,000. If we went college by college, we thought we could do it in a few months. We knew it would take some time, but since we had no idea what we were doing or where we were going with this, it seemed the thing to do. We decided we had to meet more frequently than monthly so we went to a semi-monthly calendar. Also, a small group had volunteered to help with the coordination so that the burden did not fall on the women in Business. We invited the women from Engineering and Agriculture to continue attending the lunches if they were interested and several did. At every lunch, we extended this same invitation and fairly soon we had a core group that came to most of the lunches and took on the task of coordinating.

At that time, my son David was enrolled in the Ohio State University Child Care Center. Judy Fountain Yesso was the director of the center and I had come to know her fairly well. One day when I dropped David off, Judy and I began talking and I told her about the meetings we were having with women faculty. The result of that discussion was my realization that women staff had the same kinds of climate issues. However, with thousands of women staff, it was not feasible to invite entire units to lunch. Judy provided a list of several dozen women administrators who she believed might be interested. We invited them to a lunch and again there was enormous enthusiasm for being part of the effort. We then invited them to recommend additional staff women to invite. From then on we included staff women in every lunch and every meeting. Also, from then on Judy Fountain Yesso became an integral member in the network.

Inviting staff women to be part of the effort was one of the smartest things we did. They had the political smarts and understanding of the entire university structure that is difficult for women faculty to acquire because they tend to work in their department world. We then began including support staff women and women students who held leadership positions.

Within a couple of months of beginning the lunches we were having them twice a week. At some point we changed the name of the Faculty Club board to "Women Faculty and Staff." We were there so often that people began to wonder what was happening. We were told that one of the deans began referring to us as "those guerrilla girls from the College of Business." Of course, we delighted in hearing this.

At around this point, we decided we needed to meet individually with women who held formal leadership positions—deans, associate deans, chairs, assistant vice presidents (we had no women vice presidents at that time), and associate (now “vice”) provosts. We wanted to make sure they knew what was going on and to make sure they felt invited and included if they chose to participate. This was another excellent decision. With only one exception, all of these women enthusiastically supported what we were doing. They also were inside the room when decisions were made and they could translate to the men what was going on and help nudge them to make changes. They also gave us excellent advice and sometimes inside information on how our efforts were being received.

At the time this organizing effort was going on, email was not in wide use at the university. We had to do everything by either campus mail or telephone. We developed a system of liaisons. Each college and each administrative unit had a volunteer who agreed to be the liaison. Each time we had a lunch or a meeting of any kind, we sent the appropriate number of copies to each liaison and she distributed the material to the women in her unit. This took an enormous amount of coordination, as well as copy paper and campus envelopes. Professor Barbara Snyder, now the president of Case Western Reserve University and one of the key women in developing the network, coordinated the labeling of the hundreds of campus envelopes we used. Faculty and staff women from all over campus would provide us with stacks of campus mail envelopes whenever we needed more.

We made many, many copies of everything we mailed. I met with my department chair, a majority man, and asked if there was any problem with my using my particular allotment of copy paper to use for this project. I fully explained what we were doing. His response was that I should feel free to make as many copies as I wanted out of the entire department’s allotment because the department never came close to using its copy allotment. I told him it could be thousands. His response was that he viewed this as appropriate university business and I should make as many as I needed. He is one of the many majority male allies who made an important contribution to the effort.

After having these meetings for nine months, at which point we had connected with hundreds and hundreds of women, an assistant vice president Linda Meadows suggested that we needed to do something more than have meetings to meet more women. We agreed it was time to act. But, what to do? We had no formal structure and no formal leaders. Everything was done by consensus. We didn’t even have a name. We discussed adopting a name. But, we decided it was much more powerful to have no formal name. We just wanted to be a massive network of women, all of whom were equals and all of whom could speak for the group with equal authority. We decided we could refer to ourselves as “the women’s grassroots network” but there could be no capital letters because it was not a formal name. Gordon Gee had become president of the university in 1990. We had several openings at the vice president level. Someone suggested that a good first action was that we should write a letter to Gee supporting the appointment of women to some of these open positions.

We set another meeting to discuss this suggestion and the announcement went out through the liaisons. We tried to have meetings at lunch time so that support staff could more easily attend. We also tried to hold the meetings at different locations on campus so as to make it easier for as many women as possible to at least attend some of the meetings. After several meetings and several drafts that our liaisons shared with the women in their unit and received input, we came up with a final letter to be sent to President Gee. We then sent it back to the liaisons along with signature sheets inviting

women to sign in support of the letter. We had no idea how many we might receive. A number of staff women as well as some untenured faculty were reluctant to sign for fear it might affect their jobs. We were totally supportive of each individual woman's decision—whether they signed had absolutely no impact on their ability to be part of the network.

We received back 656 signatures from throughout the university. We were amazed that we got this number. We then had to determine how to present the letter to the president. A number of women who worked in the president's office were part of the network. We made the intentional decision not to exclude any woman who was interested. We were never secretive about what we were doing and felt no need to keep anything from anyone. Indeed, the women in the president's office were valuable members of the network. One of these women, Sheryl Hansen, was particularly valuable. Sheryl was the assistant to Elizabeth Gee, Gordon's first wife, who held a position within the president's office as well as in the Department of Women's Studies. Sheryl suggested that a small group of us should meet with Gordon Gee and present the letter to him in person. She set up the meeting.

We then had to decide who would attend since we had no formal leaders and no formal structure. For the meeting with the president we decided we needed faculty, staff and students, and that the women should represent the diversity at the university. We came up with eight women. We presented the letter to the president along with the stack of signature sheets which was about two inches thick. He read the letter in the meeting and seemed very supportive and receptive. He asked if his wife had signed it. We actually didn't know because the liaisons had collected the signatures. He then said, it didn't matter because he was sure if she didn't sign it, she was totally supportive. We were sure of that, also. He then asked who he could contact in the future about the letter and about the group. We had expected that question and the response we came up with and stuck to was "We have no formal leadership. We are a true grassroots network so you can feel free to contact any one of the 656 women who signed the letter." He then repeated, "Yes, I understand but who should I contact?" We repeated our response to him. When we saw his reaction to this, we knew we had a powerful strategy of having no formal leaders and no formal name.

When Gordon Gee filled his leadership team, he did indeed name three women to be vice presidents, one of whom was a woman of color. We were pleased.

The letter was our first action. Over the next few years we had many more actions. A few examples will suffice for purposes of explaining the origins of The Women's Place. We did several more letters. One with approximately 1,100 signatures went to Governor Voinovich over naming more women to the Board of Trustees. We also had a small group meeting with Attorney General of the State of Ohio, Lee Fisher, whose legal authority included naming the university's associate legal counsel who also was a state assistant attorney general. The purpose of that meeting was to express our dissatisfaction with his naming of a male to that position when there were so many well-qualified women attorneys. The next associate counsel named was a woman.

We had a series of lunches to which we invited all of the male leadership at the university—all vice presidents, deans, department chairs, and student leaders—to discuss climate issues and strategies for how we could all work together to address the issues. We made sure we always outnumbered them at the lunches by 3 to 1. Our approach always was to offer to work together to identify problems and

solutions and not to simply complain and make allegations. We always tried to be strong, but reasonable and we never wanted to back people into a corner.

We nominated candidates and provided input to search committees for every high-level position. For example, when a provost search was commenced in the early 1990s, we nominated the woman who was then provost at Stanford, but had not yet served on the national scene—Condoleezza Rice. She was not deemed worthy enough by the committee to even make the first cut.

We also organized several rallies. In the early 1990s, during one of the budget crises, a proposal was made to reduce funding for the Child Care Center. No such cut was proposed for items we considered less important than caring for children, like flowers for university landscaping. We decided we needed a rally on the Oval culminating in a stop in the president's office to protest the cut. Hundreds, including local news crews, showed up for the rally. The high point was when Kay Bea Jones, a professor in Architecture and one of the key women in creating and keeping the network going, walked three children up the steps to Bricker and we all followed her in to speak to the president. The funds for the Center were not cut.

As the efforts of the network became more widely known, more women began to identify with the network. Many of these women were also members of existing groups—The Council on Academic Excellence for Women, an advisory group to the provost; the Association of Faculty and Staff Women, the Women of Color Consortium, and various college-based women's groups. As a result, alliances naturally occurred with many of the women's groups on campus. It actually is not accurate to say we formed alliances with these groups. We became them and they became us. We made sure that the leadership of all the groups were separate from the perceived leaders of the women's grassroots network so that from the outside it looked like many separate groups supporting the same causes.

Critical to the efforts was the commitment to honor and respect the leadership of each group while continuing to work together as a network with its informal leadership. This organic alignment was not without concerns. Some of the individual groups feared that their agenda would be marginalized by the network. One such group was the Women of Color Consortium. The leadership of the Women of Color Consortium expressed the concern that in their experience, when they joined forces with majority women, only majority women benefitted from any progress with the result that women of color felt used in the process. They indicated if they felt this was happening in the network, they would refuse to be further involved. The network had no formal leadership, no steering committee, or any group that made decisions for anyone else—everything was done by consensus in open meetings. Thus, no one was going to be making decisions without the approval of everyone. Numerous women of color, both faculty and staff, regularly participated in the meetings. We all worked very hard to make sure that all voices were heard and respected. I believe we were successful. Women of color seemed to remain committed to the network throughout its existence.

At one meeting shortly after we submitted the letter to Gordon Gee, a suggestion was made that we could benefit by having our own phone line. We now had thousands of women from all over the university as participants. Mary Reed, one of the participants from UNITS indicated she could set it up for us and would arrange for a number that was easy to remember. This, of course, would cost money and we had none. We then decided to send out a call through the liaisons for contributions. We didn't

want them coming to any individual woman so we set up a checking account in the name of “the women’s grassroots network.” The first check that came in, and this also was true for the several other times we sent out a call for funds, was for \$100 from Dr. Nancy Zimpher. Nancy at that time was an associate dean in the College of Education. She had come to several of our meetings and signed the letters. Nancy recently retired as Chancellor of the State University of New York System.

This is just a sampling of what we did over about a three year period. We indeed were a force to be reckoned with. Our goal was to make culture change—to create a university in which women could thrive. The main issues on which we focused were the under representation of women in leadership positions, salary inequities, inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and sexual harassment.

The Creation of the Task Force that recommended The Women’s Place

It was now the early 1990s. We had our own phone line with voice mail, a checking account, and a lot of clout on campus. But, we had been doing this on a totally voluntary basis for three years now and exhaustion was setting in. We knew that the public appearance was that the network was strong and thriving and we wanted to maintain that as long as possible. But, we knew the truth — that exhaustion was setting in and our days were numbered.

In 1993, Nancy Zimpher was named the dean of the College of Education. Shortly after, she asked if I would meet with her. When I arrived for the meeting, Nancy said, “I wouldn’t be in this position if it were not for the women’s grassroots network. Now that I am a dean, I want to know how I can be most helpful for women on this campus.” We then talked about the network and the exhaustion factor. My response was we needed an office with a budget, a paid staff, and a voice at the table. Gordon Gee had made it clear many times that he did not support creating any new offices to support what he referred to contemptuously as “special interest groups.” Nancy concluded that we had to figure out a different strategy. We came to the conclusion that we needed a few more minds in the process to help us think through what we could do. Nancy was adamant that Gordon Gee not know we were having discussions — she did not want him to think she was trying to undermine his position on creating new offices. We then decided we each would recommend two women to join us for discussions and we each could veto the other’s choices. Nancy wanted Andrea Lunsford who had headed the task force on women that Gordon Gee had appointed as well as Gail Feinistein who was the development officer for the Critical Difference for Women scholarship program that Nancy chaired at that time. I recommended Judy Fountain Yesso and Sheryl Hansen who had been the two most important sources of wisdom for me throughout the years we developed the network. No vetos were exercised.

Over the next couple of years the six of us met monthly. We called ourselves the “Stealth Group” because no one else knew of our meetings. We came up with all kinds of proposals that did not involve creating an office. We concluded none would work because they all relied too heavily on volunteer efforts, which simply would not work in the long run. Finally, in 1996, we concluded that we simply had to have an office. An office was the university norm for getting work done. Nancy agreed. She wanted to take this proposal to two of the women vice presidents we had at the time — Ginny Trethewey in

Legal Affairs and Janet Ashe in Business & Finance — to seek their input and help. After Nancy met with Ginny and Janet, the three of them concluded an office was necessary and agreed that they would meet as a group with Gordon Gee to attempt to persuade him.

To everyone's surprise, Gordon immediately agreed that it was worth considering and he supported setting up a task force to make a recommendation. He also provided funding of \$100,000 to support the work of the task force. This was simply unheard of. We were astounded. We didn't realize that at the time he made this decision, he already had decided to resign the presidency of Ohio State and move to Brown University. I can understand his decision to appoint the task force on his way out the door — that was a popular tactic to avoid dealing with difficult decisions. I never have understood his decision to devote \$100,000 for its work, unless it was to create ill will for the task force (which actually did happen).

In any event, the task force, chaired by Professor Sally Boysen from Psychology, was created and began its work. The members were recommended by Nancy Zimpher, Ginny Trethewey and Janet Ashe. All of the task force members either had been active participants in the network or were supportive of it. It used some of the \$100,000 to hold an overnight retreat at Cherry Valley Lodge. Almost none of the rest of the money was spent.

The task force completed its work in 1997 with a recommendation that an office be created that would focus on changing the university climate to make it more compatible for women faculty and staff. One significant decision that was made early on was that the office would not duplicate services provided elsewhere in the university. Because Student Life had offices focusing on women students, the recommendation was that the new office focus on faculty and staff only and not students. Because both the University Senate and the Office of Human Resources had offices to which faculty and staff could take grievances, the office would not perform the function of handling individual differences. Because many offices and groups provided programming, the office would not be a programming office. The focus would be on institutional change consistent with the university's strategic goal of creating and maintaining a world class faculty and staff.

The task force also recommended that it be a stand-alone office that would report directly to the provost or the president. The conclusion was that when women's issues were consolidated with other diversity issues, they tended to get lost. Moreover, it needed to report directly to either the president or provost to give it the stature it needed to be successful.

The task force further recommended that the director be a high level position with a high enough salary so that a person of stature and authority could be hired. Again, we felt this was critical to the success of the office.

Finally, the task force recommended creating a high-level advisory committee that would serve an oversight function for the office. The hope was that this would give the office clout and that the members could serve as ambassadors to the rest of the university.

I always viewed The Women's Place as the institutionalization of the women's grassroots network and I believe that the task force members shared this view.

By the time the task force had completed its work, Brit Kirwan had been named the president of the university. Nancy Zimpher arranged for the task force to present its report to Brit at one of the meetings he held on campus prior to actually assuming the presidency. We spent a meeting developing our strategy on how to convince Kirwan to support the office. The chair had a quick summary of the lengthy report ready to orally present to him since we assumed he wouldn't have read it. We arrived at the meeting. President Kirwan sat down and as soon as introductions were concluded, he said, "I have read the report and I fully agree we need this office. What are the next steps?" We were not at all prepared for this. Nancy Zimpher who thankfully was at the meeting suggested the next step would be that we meet with the provost Ed Ray and develop a process for vetting the proposal with all of the usual parties — the Council of Deans, the Faculty Senate, the University Staff Advisory Council, as well as others who Ed suggested. It was a short, but productive meeting!

We met with Ed and then began the vetting process. I don't recall how this was decided, but Kay Bea Jones, Becky Parker who then was an assistant vice president in Student Affairs, and I became the vetting team. We all had been active participants in the women's grassroots network as well as members of the task force. We spent the next several months presenting it to different groups. The most objections came from the University Senate. It was there that the issue of the \$100,000 was raised and objected to. They also just seemed not to like another office being created.

After we met with all of the groups that were suggested, we met with Ed Ray and presented the reactions, some positive and some negative. Ed's response was, "I don't need anyone's permission to create an office that reports to me and so we are just going to do this." Ed then agreed we could use the remainder of the \$100,000 Gordon Gee had given for the work of the task force as seed money for The Women's Place. We then set up a search committee for the new director. It was chaired by Carole Anderson who at that point was a vice provost. The salary and title were approved for a high level administrative position. The search led to the hiring of Judy Fountain Yesso as the first director. She reported directly to the provost and had the title of Assistant Provost and Director, The Women's Place.

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Her research on employment law, business and government has been widely published in peer-reviewed journals, and she has served in many editorial positions, including editor-in-chief at The American Business Law Journal. She is a recipient of the Senior Faculty Award of Excellence from the Academy of Legal Studies in Business, the Fisher College of Business Pace Setters Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award, the university's Distinguished Affirmative Action Award and Distinguished Service Award, the Franklin County Women of Achievement Award and many others.