

**THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF W.I.s HELD ON 8<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2021 at which our President Jane Elphick was a link representative.**

This year's Annual Meeting was held virtually, with the trustees and speakers being present at the Royal Society of Arts in London, and over 2000 of us online. We did lose connectivity fairly soon after it started, but it later transpired that this was not my fault (as I had immediately supposed) but a national disruption which was later mentioned on the news. Fortunately back up had been arranged via You Tube, so I didn't miss very much of our national Chair's speech.

Lynne Stubbings is retiring this year as Chair, along with five other members of the Board of Trustees, including the Treasurer. This seemed a surprisingly large number in one go. Lynne spoke of the challenges of the last year for the Board, staff and members alike, but said she had been "bowled over" by the inventiveness of W.I.s across the country, saying that the real success has been the sense of community "which is the W.I. at its best". She mentioned the growth of online meetings, the WI Wanderers Facebook page, and the eight new virtual WIs that have started, enabling women around the world to have a W.I. they can join. Lynne also mentioned the closure of Denman, which had clearly caused considerable heartache to the Trustees, but was described as unavoidable. However, the early success of Denman at Home was mentioned, allowing Denman tutorials to be accessed by a far wider geographical spread of members. The winners of the Lady Denman Cup and the Huxley Cup were then announced.

Julia Roberts, Treasurer, reported an overall deficit of £1.545 million this year. There has been a reduction of income from trading and events in particular, but also lower expenses and some gains in investments and furlough payments for Denman staff. A loan of £1.5 million to Denman would be repaid once the building is sold. Reserves have been required, but Julia assured members that having a robust reserves policy has enabled the W.I. to withstand the storm despite the drop in income, and this will continue into next year. She was confident that costs would not need to be passed on to members, and added that the Trustees remain committed to increasing expenditure on membership and training. The decision to allow individual W.I.s to have more control of their own finances, and the move to April for the start of the subscription year, had both been responses to member feedback. Finally, Julia encouraged W.I.s to join the Gift Aid scheme as this can be back dated for four years.

The new Board of Trustees were introduced, just by name, including six new members. I was disappointed to note that although there is a trustee from the Isle of Man, the most northerly mainland trustee is from Derbyshire. However, it is great to have a full Board of enthusiastic Trustees. Tributes were paid to the retiring members and flowers given.

One of the most moving parts of the day was two montages of photos showing all the many activities that W.I. members have been doing during lockdown – a great advert for our organisation.

**The Resolution** "To raise awareness of the subtle signs of ovarian cancer" was proposed by Kathy Heathcote of the splendidly named Kitchen Dancers WI, Hampshire Federation. Kathy spoke very movingly about her late daughter-in-law Vicky, who died of ovarian cancer after raising awareness during her five years of treatment. This was all the more poignant as the meeting day would apparently have been Vicky's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The motion was seconded by Ruby Adler, an impressive young member who stressed the profile of the W.I in getting things done. John Butler, Gynaecological Oncologist, was the expert speaker. He advised that survival rates are currently 43%, but could rise to 90% if ovarian cancer can be detected earlier. Apparently screening is not effective, as the signs are subtle, particularly in women over 60, and often confused with something else as they include bloating, stomach discomfort, tiredness etc. Only 25% of women currently present to his unit via direct GP referral – the majority in fact present with other illness and ovarian cancer is diagnosed alongside, which emphasises the need for good GP awareness – scarily only 40% of GPs said they would refer older women with vague symptoms for tests for ovarian cancer. John also stressed the importance of not feeling you are wasting the doctors' time – apparently British women are particularly prone to this. There was no speaker against the motion, although some points to consider were put by a Board member in the interests of balance. These focused on whether this was a good use of W.I. resources at this time. There was only one speaker from the floor, who spoke movingly about her friend who had sought testing after accidentally noting stomach pain after she took up yoga on retirement.

Voting as to whether to support the resolution is online this year, and votes can be sent to me as link delegate up until the end of June.

**The speakers:** There truly was an all-star cast with three very high profile women, all of whom were accomplished and inspirational in their different ways.

HRH The Countess of Wessex spoke of her mother's strong influence on her, and of her recollection of making a "garden in a box" for W.I competitions as a child. She went on to speak about one of the very many charities she supports – Peacebuilders – which uses the connections, skills and inclinations of women to build a peaceful way of life in war torn countries. However, despite their success in local communities it remains difficult to persuade men to include Peacebuilders in higher level discussions. This prompted the Countess to talk of how women used to be referred to as "the fairer sex", but she now interprets this phrase differently. She spoke powerfully, e.g. "it's not fair that 93% of women experience sexual harassment at work, it's not fair that women and girls suffer the most from emotional and sexual exploitation". She concluded by saying that the W.I is full of strong women who can make a difference "you are strong, brave and capable".

Dame Cressida Dick spoke of early women pioneers in the Metropolitan Police that she now leads, although still only 30% of officers are women (50% in non-officer roles). She spoke of the need to prioritise safety for women and girls, and did not shy away from discussing the murder of Sarah Everard. Women officers in south London have set up a "walk and talk" scheme in response to this, to improve links with local communities. Dame Cressida also spoke about the success of Domestic Violence Protection Notices, particularly around coercive control, which allow victims some protection and respite while pursuing charges. In thanking the speaker, Trustee Ann Jones reminded us that the W.I resolutions in 1922 and 1924 were influential in increasing numbers of women officers to "one per station" nationwide.

Baroness Brenda Hale also had a mother who belongs to the W.I in Leeds, who sounds a redoubtable woman, bringing up three teenage daughters after early widowhood. Baroness Hale is proud of her heritage and state education, but modestly still described herself as privileged. She spoke of her early life studying and then teaching law at Manchester University, which gave her the option to combine motherhood with her career – an option she feels is still very difficult for women barristers in particular to achieve today. Her academic success led to the High Court and eventually Supreme Court – always very much in the minority as a woman. Baroness Hale spoke passionately about the importance of women being involved in the justice system at every level "the law must serve everybody, and people must believe that judges are their judges, embodying fairness and equality". She also suggested that there may be another reason why women are needed across the justice system – we bring a fresh perspective, additional experience and knowledge, giving several examples including a case involving prosthetic bras. And yes, she was wearing a brooch. It was a dragonfly, which I am reliably informed symbolises hope, change and love.