

The Voter

April 2023

CO-PRESIDENTS' MESSAGE



Hello, members.

It's an exciting time to be a voting rights advocate in Minnesota: We're ecstatic about the passage of Restore the Vote! This year about 55,000 Minnesotans who've served time for a felony will regain access to the polls. We look forward to working with our partners at LWV Minnesota, the Minnesota Office of the Secretary of State, U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services, and others to engage with new, reinstated and experienced voters this summer and fall.

More good news: The Democracy for the People Act ([SF 3](#) and [HF 3](#)) is moving closer and closer to floor votes in both the MN House and Senate. When passed, this legislation will have a profound impact on elections in Minnesota, including automatic voter registration, pre-registration

The Democracy for the People Act is getting closer to a floor vote! Above, Amy Perna, co-president of LWVSP and associate director at the state League, joined members of the We Choose Us coalition for a Capitol press conference.

At the podium is the House bill's chief author, Rep. Emma Greenman of Minneapolis. Secretary of State Steve Simon is at far left. Amy's in the back row, wearing a beige jacket.

for 16- and 17-year olds, bans on voter and election official intimidation and harrasment, and more.

We've been spending this late winter planning for the future. The LWVSP Board met in March to discuss priorities, including succession planning, membership, and civic engagement. (See story on page 3.) While LWVSP boards have had retreats throughout our 104-year history, this was the first in-person one in a while. It was nice to spend time together, think of the big picture, and generate ideas for the years to come.

As always, please [reach out](#) with questions or ideas or to [get more involved in our work](#).

—Amy Perna & Heidi Kloempken

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EVENTS & OPPORTUNITIES

Open Position: Candidate Forum Coordinator for 2023

Come work with us! This position is an opportunity to meet city council and school board candidates and flex your organizational skills.

Time commitment, which varies depending on the number of races, is typically about 10 hours a week from August to mid-November, with 15 hours a week needed during October. A stipend is awarded the season's end.

Please [read more about the job](#) and reach out to co-president [Amy Perna](#), who can answer your questions and tell you how to apply.

Save These Dates!

April 15: Third Saturday With LWVSP

All member meet-up for casual networking in a relaxed atmosphere. Make connections, find out what's going on, and enjoy each others' company at this monthly event. April location is Saint Paul Brewing, 688 Minnehaha Ave E., St Paul. We'll be there Saturday, 4/15, from 1 to 3 p.m.

May 13: New Member 101

If you've joined in the last 18 months, this is for you. While this informational session is geared for new members, it's open to all. No need to register—just [drop in on Zoom](#) Saturday 5/13, 11 a.m. to noon.

May 20: Third Saturday With LWVSP

We'll meet at Keg and Case, 928 West 7th Street, St. Paul. Watch for an email reminder with details.

June 5: LWV Saint Paul Annual Meeting

A fun event is being planned! Look for details on [our events page](#) in May.

Voter Services Seeks to Boost Impact With New Members

The Voter Services Committee seeks energetic, imaginative individuals to join us as we plan for the 2023 election season.

There's always good work to do on voter education, registration, and facilitation; in 2023, we may see new opportunities, if bills to expand voter participation pass in the Minnesota House and Senate (see this month's Presidents' Letter). By growing our committee, we can expand our impact.

To volunteer or find out more, [contact us](#) (voterservice.lwvsp@gmail.com). Feel free to include info about your skills and interests or ask any questions you have.

We look forward to welcoming those who've worked with our committee in the past, along with new members who want to help increase voter participation in St. Paul.

—Joann Ellis and Pamela Mercier

Pertinent Programs on Voting in Minnesota, Now & Ahead

April 3: Voting Restrictions, Voting Rights, & the Future of the Franchise in Minnesota

A panel of experts (from the Judicial Research Center, the Isaiah Project, and the University of Minnesota) gather to discuss recent legislation and what they see ahead. The event, 6:30 to 8 p.m., is free, with donation suggested. [Register online](#).

April 10: Restore the Vote: Putting the New Law Into Action

The bill's sponsor, State Senator Bobby Joe Champion, and Secretary of State Steve Simon will discuss why the legislation was needed and how it will be implemented. 7 to 8 p.m. on Monday, April 10. [Register online](#).

BOARD RETREAT

An Afternoon of Visions, Plans, and Cookies

On Saturday, March 11, LWVSP leaders met at the League's St. Paul offices to discuss priorities and envision ways to continue improving our democracy here in Saint Paul.

Introductions and opening icebreaker questions helped us get to know each other better (and elicited quite a few laughs). Heidi and Amy reviewed our operations, including budgeting, technology, and our relationship to the state and national league (where a portion of our member dues go).

Beatrice led us in a brainstorming session, where we individually jotted dozens of ideas, on Post-It notes and collectively grouped them under these three topic areas:

1. **Civic engagement:** What does it look like moving forward?
2. **Succession planning:** How can we attract and prepare future leaders?
3. **Membership:** How can we grow, diversity, and engage our base?

After that, we broke out into small groups to delve further into the ideas we'd generated, then reported back to the larger group. With board terms expiring in June, it was a good time to discuss how we've nominated presidents in the past and consider the best approach this year. On this, we'll be reaching out to you, our members, soon.

Civic engagement was an especially interesting topic given the recent voter registration efforts in the state legislature. With new laws come new opportunities!

In the coming weeks and months, the board will



From left: Joann Ellis, Grace Reardon, Jacquelyn Kelly, Heidi Kloempken, Amy Perna, Beatrice Owen, Donna Addkison, Pamela Mercier, Nona Beining



Beatrice Owen, queen of the Post-it Notes



Grace Reardon (left) and Pam Mercier. Not shown: Hamen-tashen cookies from Cecil's Deli.

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American Labor Rights & Wrongs

On February 8, the morning book club discussed *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor* by Kim Kelly, which chronicles the history of American workers fighting for better working conditions and fair wages, often at great personal cost.

Each chapter covers a particular group and leaders, many of them women. Kelly devotes the first chapter to the Mill Girls of Lowell, Massachusetts, where dangerous working conditions led to disabling injuries and deaths. Following protests and strikes, they formed the first women's labor union in the U.S. The book also covers tragic events such as the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, where 146 garment workers died behind locked doors. Kelly explores labor discrimination based on race, disability, and women's status as sex workers.

Our discussion covered historic labor injustices and the issues faced by workers today.

During the terms of Presidents Hoover and Eisenhower, the government deported to Mexico more than a million Latino workers, many of whom were U.S. citizens. We spoke about the prevalence of private, for-profit prisons that provide cheap labor—sometimes for well-known companies. We noted, too, that most manufacturing by U.S. companies uses cheap overseas labor, while corporate CEOs make millions. In 2021, the average CEO was paid 399 times more than the average worker.

Board Retreat continued from page 3

further discuss and distill the ideas. Our goal is to set ambitious but achievable priorities for the coming months and years.

Ideas on what you'd like to see us do? We'd love to hear, so please drop us a line!

—Beatrice Owen

Finally, we discussed recent labor scandals, such as the case in Minnesota where teens as young as 13 were hired to work overnight in slaughterhouses, cleaning dangerous machinery and using caustic chemicals.

Kelly's book reminds us that organized labor and laws to protect workers and ensure fair treatment remain as important today as they were in the 1800s.

—Mary Palmer

Morning Schedule

Join us April 12, 10 a.m., at the Highland Park Library, 1974 Ford Parkway. We'll be discussing *The Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival and Hope in an American Crisis* by Andrea Elliott.

On May 10, we'll discuss *Political Tribes: Group Instincts and the Fate of Nation* by Amy Chua.

As always, you're welcome even if you haven't read the book. [Email Mary](mailto:mgp33@msn.com) (mcp33@msn.com) to receive updates.

Evening Schedule

We meet the first Monday of the month, 6:30 p.m. on Zoom. All are welcome, even if you haven't read the book.

April 3: *Here, Right Matters: An American Story* by Alexander Vindman

May 1: *Gideon's Trumpet* by Anthony Lewis

Contact [Karen Williams](mailto:kare14will@gmail.com) (kare14will@gmail.com) to get email reminders and Zoom links.

The Voter is published every other month by the League of Women Voters St. Paul. To submit suggestions or news, [contact Diane Hellekson](mailto:dianereally@hotmail.com) (dianereally@hotmail.com). Deadline for submissions is two weeks before the first of the month of publication, with exceptions for time-sensitive information.

Beyond Racial Covenants: Examining Historic Housing Discrimination

Suburban Community Channel (SCC) and Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN) broadcast this Zoom program, moderated by Heidi Kloempken, co-president of LWVSP.

You can view this program and others on our [LWVSP YouTube page](#). Our Saint Paul: Learn with the League offers programs 8 to 10 months a year.

Welcoming the Dear Neighbor?, a program launched at St. Catherine University four years ago, partnered with the University of Minnesota's Mapping Prejudice program to identify racial covenants in Ramsey County. (Mapping Prejudice began its work in Hennepin County.)

The St. Kate's program participants spent much of 2020 leading online sessions on transcribing deeds for Ramsey County. A county map, presented during the program, showed the largest clumps of racial covenants in Highland Park, Como, and neighborhoods near the State Fair and Beaver Lake on the Greater East Side.

In the past few years, though, the Welcoming project has focused less on mapping and discharging covenants than on how the conditions came to be, said Dr. Rachel Neiwert, associate professor of history at the University.

She and her student collaborators are learning "about the other strategies and tools, which are

all quite horrific, that white St. Paul neighbors used to claim neighborhoods as white spaces," Neiwert says.

Although covenants became illegal in the mid-1900's, the discrimination, of course, did not end.

"Racism is entirely nimble, in really terrible ways," Neiwert said. "As racial covenants became illegal, white people found other ways to claim space, to claim neighborhoods, for white people only."

These other tactics kept recurring in the research Neiwert and three of her students presented.

Neiwert began with the history of 888 Lincoln Avenue in the Crocus Hill neighborhood. In 1909 a Black dentist, Dr. Bell, rented a duplex two black families. Agitated that Bell was renting the property—apparently more than they were by his ownership—white neighbors established an association to remove the Black renters, who endured racist slander in newspapers, broken windows, and more.

The tenants in Bell's lower duplex moved out early, but the upstairs renter, Mrs. Jackson, stood firm. The story was extensively covered in local and national mainstream (white) press. One

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Sophie Gibson



Maya Villafuerte



Tessa Shoenecker

Housing Discrimination, continued

article claimed that Dr. Bell only rented to Black tenants in hopes of profiting by selling the duplex to those desperate to keep Crocus Hill white.

Neiwert found no coverage of this incident in the Black press and explains that, for Black people, the discrimination and mistreatment was so commonplace that a story like this simply wasn't newsworthy.

Second-year history and art history student Sophie Gibson looked for little known stories in the archives and digital newspaper database of the Minnesota Historical Society. The name of Frederick McCracken kept popping up.

McCracken worked as a stenographer to U.S. Rep. Fred Stevens in St. Paul and Washington, as an apartment superintendent in New York, and an insurance salesman and realtor in the Rondo neighborhood. McCracken said that while a majority of his people lived in Rondo, it was by choice, and they would not tolerate being restricted to that or any other neighborhood.

When Gibson looked for addresses he had listed for sale, she found they were all casualties of I-94 when it sliced through Rondo.

McCracken, who served as chairman of the local chapter of the Urban League and vice president of the St. Paul Negro Business League, was among the first people to work against systemic racism in Twin Cities housing. Gibson thinks more people should know his name.

"He was an exceptional advocate and person, for the Black community and beyond," she said.

He died in St. Paul in 1944.

Maya Isabel Villafuerte, a third-year history student at St. Kate's, focused on the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC), founded in 1934 in New York by Father John Lafarge, who believed that being a good Catholic meant caring of one's neighbors, regardless of race. The grassroots CIC quickly spread to other cities, including Chicago and, in 1958, the Twin Cities. The idea was to encourage neighbors to gather, talk, and inform one another about housing needs and disparities.



Frederick McCracken

The Twin Cities chapter published the Branches newsletter, where Villafuerte found efforts dedicated to promoting equality in housing. Another program facilitated white students visiting Black families in their homes, with the goal of bridging gaps and "demystifying" Black individuals and culture. While it sounds a little peculiar today, Gibson found evidence that the program was well-received, and even expanded beyond the Twin Cities proper.

The availability of extensive CIC data was largely due to the meticulous records of Patricia Caponi, a St. Kate's

alumna and founding member of the local CIC, who donated her artifacts to the University. This past summer, when Villafuerte visited Caponi in her Carondelet Village apartment, she was inspired to by Caponi and the council's energy and determination.

While the Twin Cities chapter of the CIC had little success in changing laws, it was well-regarded by the people it reached. Villafuerte feels the power of community the group represented is still relevant. "We have to educate each other . . . and work together to fight injustice whenever we see it," said Villafuerte. "Patricia Caponi did an amazing job of explaining that."

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Housing Discrimination, continued

Tessa Schoenecker presented her research into the St. Paul Human Rights Commission, a government body established in 1967. This department, which both investigates and prosecutes, reacts to complaints from people who've experienced discrimination in housing or employment. Complaints have reported landlords who won't rent to people based on race, property neglect that force tenants to leave, and intimidation. The only reason so many of these racist events are documented because individuals standing up for their rights.

In 1967 a prospective renter issued a complaint about the owner of 472 Holly Avenue, who was explicit, over the phone, that the room was unavailable to Black tenants. The commission sent a white secretary, posing as a prospective renter, to speak with the owner about the rental and record the interactions. When this confirmed the initial allegation, the owner was obligated to file reports to the commissions and, every time he turned down a tenant, explain why.

It was a different story at 1880 East Iowa Avenue when, in 1968 a Black tenant claimed the owner was trying to force him out by keeping the heat so low that his infant son died. The owner simply

Is There a Racial Covenant on Your Home?

Visit the [Mapping Prejudice website](#).

To discharge a covenant, you can't simply remove the language; you must add language to deem the covenant no longer valid.

Visit the [website for Just Deeds](#), which has discharged 404 racial covenants in 19 Minnesota cities to date.

denied the claim, and suggested that the tenant could always leave. After the man moved from the unheated house, the Commission lost track of the former tenant and the



case was never resolved. This was an outcome that Schoenecker saw over and over, as tenants in untenable or unsafe housing felt there was no choice other than to leave, resulting in the owner being able to continue the bad practices.

One last example was at 26 Douglas Street. In 1970, a white woman who rented the property was evicted the next day when the landlord found out her husband was Black. After the renters lodged a complaint, the landlord used various legal maneuvers to avoid accountability; her daughter even physically attacked the couple outside the home. Eventually, the landlord mother and the daughter were found guilty and paid a \$100 fine.

While it's sobering to hear about this not-so-distant history of discrimination in our area, Niewert reminded us that "feeling bad about the past doesn't necessarily make things better." She urged us to be mindful of these stories when voting for initiatives, amendments, and candidates in our time. While discharging properties' racial covenant is worthwhile, she urged us not to forget all the other, more insidious policies and behaviors that exclude certain people from certain neighborhoods.

—Cheryl Bailey

Seeking students of any age with a yen to write digital content

If you know someone who fits that description, send them this way! Opportunity to propose, write, and edit stories alongside an experienced journalist and content designer (aka The Voter editor). Ideas for improving our website are also welcome.

[Email Diane](#) (dianeReally@hotmail.com) to find out more. Use the subject line: LWV newsletter!