

KNOW YOUR POWER USE YOUR POWER

Ann Charnley

We have been talking about bringing more women to the welcome table. In a few months it will be the hundredth anniversary of women getting the vote.

Today, there are 127 women out of 535 members in Congress. Women may hold up half the sky, but holding public office is a slow march for women. And, of course, elected office is where the rules are made for all of us.

Texan Ann Richards took the plunge; she ran for public office and won. She was the first woman governor of Texas. How did she do it? Her style was well, Texan.

She spoke truth to power. "Power is what calls the shots, and power is a white male game," she said. She said that out loud. As far as I know, that is the first time a woman spoke publicly about the lock white men had on elected office.

It was also her not subtle way of saying women weren't going to get a better lot in life till they stuck their necks out and ran for public office.

"Ladies you have got to get in the game if you want change. Forget nice. You can be a player for all women – run for office."

"You can organize a campaign crew, find a finance chairman, get out there and ask for money, challenge your opponent's statements, say you can do better. Win and change the laws that hold women and minorities back. Use your power."

"Why that is 'PUSHY' women tell me. No lady, no nice lady, wanted to be tagged 'PUSHY.'"

Ann nailed that one too. "All men had to do was convince women that speaking out for their own interests in public was pushy. What a con? It kept nice women silent for a long time."

Then she might slip in a quote from that great champion of women's rights, Mae West: "Good girls go to Heaven, bad girls go everywhere."

At the 1988 Democratic Convention, Ann gave the opening speech.

At that time it was a given that men ran the Democratic party. Ann asked them to move over.

“Just give women a chance,” she told the convention. “After all Ginger Rodgers did everything Fred Astaire did in those wonderful dances. Only Ginger did it backwards in high heels.”

After her speech at the Democratic convention, Ann became a supernova in the party.

With that tailwind she ran for governor and won. She was going to pack as much change in the Texas government as she could in her first term. As governor she opened appointed office in state government to a roster of African Americans, and women. She introduced education programs to boost the rate of high school Graduation for minorities. She even got women into the ranks of the Texas Rangers.

You can bet Texas Republicans mounted a mighty campaign to make sure Ann was a one term governor. And, Ann, as she admitted, made the rookie mistake of underestimating her opponent, George W. Bush.

She lost her bid for re-election, but she changed Texas politics forever. Like another great woman who held elected office in Texas, Barbara Jordan, she died too young of cancer.

“I don’t want my tombstone to read: she kept a really clean House, I’d like them to remember me by saying, “She Opened the government to everyone.”