

Peach Power

Ottawa women from diverse backgrounds who wear peach scarves to promote their common cause -- giving voice to the city's voiceless -- take on local candidates

Janice Kennedy

The Ottawa Citizen

Sunday, October 08, 2006

At the front of the room, at the back, in the middle, at the microphones on the floor -- the peach scarves seemed to be everywhere. At an all-candidates' mayoral debate at Immaculata High School last Tuesday night, a generous scattering of women -- a rainbow of diversity in age, colouring, ethnic background and stylistic inclination -- were all monochromatic peach around the shoulders.

They were members of a project called the City for All Women Initiative, or CAWI. And their presence at Tuesday's meeting was another demonstration of what the group has been doing with increasing effectiveness for more than two years now: putting itself out there to make sure the voiceless get a voice.

When CAWI members asked questions from the floor on such things as services for francophones and how the qualifications of immigrant women might be better recognized, Bob Chiarelli, Alex Munter and Larry O'Brien all listened attentively. And while their answers may occasionally have been short on specifics ("We have to get people to do things," said Mr. O'Brien), they appeared earnest. CAWI, it seemed, was being taken seriously.



CREDIT: Jean Levac, the Ottawa Citizen

At Tuesday's all-candidates debate, Khadra Ali, left, Gada Nahra, centre, and Nubia Cermeno of CAWI challenged mayoral hopefuls on questions of services for francophones and how the qualifications of immigrant women might be better recognized.



The group, which receives its main funding from Status of Women Canada and a lesser amount from Ontario's Trillium Foundation, launched in 2004 as a tool for inclusiveness. Driven by the reality that there are entire communities in the city whose voices are not being heard -- including immigrant women, aboriginal women, women with disabilities, women living in poverty -- CAWI's founders determined that the new initiative would work to make these women heard.

"It's both a collaborative and an advocacy organization," says Suzanne Doerge, the founding project co-ordinator. "Social services are being cut back, services are being downloaded to the municipal level without adequate funds to maintain them -- and it's women who are being affected most, since women tend to be the care providers in the home and the family." Indeed, the Vital Signs report released last week by the Ottawa Community Foundation notes that more than a tenth of Ottawa's families are among the working poor, the numbers of

families at shelters has increased, and 39 per cent of the food distributed by food banks goes to feed children.

A longtime women's advocate, Ms. Doerge helped organize CAWI as a way of developing practical tools for the inclusiveness long called for in studies, such as the one a decade ago that followed provincial cuts by the Mike Harris government. Conducted by the City of Ottawa in partnership with community groups, it examined women's access to municipal services -- and concluded that there were gaps, especially in areas involving equity and diversity. CAWI builds on that, she says, trying to bridge those equity and diversity gaps with a concrete approach.

The project, which boasts the direct involvement of 200 women and represents 27 different community organizations, encourages women who may be standing outside to come in from the cold and sit down at the table. It helps them articulate their greatest concerns about living in Ottawa -- things like access to services, housing, safety, child care and employment -- and then provides vigorous lessons in civic participation. In workshops, brochures, community gatherings and door-to-door visits, they're taught how city government works and how they can make their views known, whether to their own councillors or city staff, or at council meetings.

As a municipal election campaign lays the groundwork for the shape of things to come, CAWI representatives are also getting the women in their communities engaged in the democratic process, encouraging their participation and helping them ask the questions that are meaningful to them.

First at the mike on Tuesday night was Nubia Cermeno, who asked the question about immigrant women's qualifications. A longtime activist from the city's Latin American community, Ms. Cermeno is on CAWI's steering committee, and is a self-confessed natural for the group. Voluble and energetic, she grins. "I'm a little bit noisy about what's going on."

She also understands the value of putting yourself out there. It was her idea to adopt the peach scarves as the project's identifying symbol, borrowing slightly from Ukraine's famous "Orange Revolution." And the scarves are working, she says. "Now they recognize us any time we're in City Hall or anywhere our presence has to be noticed." She laughs as she recalls running into Councillor Clive Doucet recently. "He looked at me and he said, 'You again!'"

Shukri D'Jama, who is also on CAWI's steering committee, is "a little bit noisy," too. The founding director of the Ottawa Somali Women's Organization, a single mother of four now-grown children, she came to Ottawa 17 years ago and immediately threw herself into volunteer work. Because she spoke some English, she became a liaison for Somali women who did not. That paved the way for nearly two decades of activist community work -- recognized in February 2005, when Mr. Chiarelli presented her with a key to the city.

Before CAWI, though, she had never been to a city council meeting or challenged councillors.

"But CAWI gives me that empowerment -- me and the other women wearing peach scarves -- to just walk in there. It was a big thing for the city councillors. They have never before seen these women participating in this type of meeting. But I think it sends a very powerful message."

Not that the message is always warmly received. Ms. Doerge recalls the reaction of Terry Kilrea's campaign office when CAWI solicited responses from the mayoral candidates before Mr. Kilrea bowed out. "They looked up the work we're doing, and said they didn't agree that the city should be doing special planning to make sure there's inclusion of different groups. They said that's not the role of municipal government." She shakes her head. "They said if he was elected, he would get rid of the equity and diversity policy."

CAWI does not endorse any candidates, either for mayor or for council, but it does encourage informed participation. "We may speak to a woman about the election," says Ms. Cermeno, "and she says she's voting for this particular person. We say, 'why?' and she says, 'because my neighbour's voting for him.' So we say, 'No, no, no. You don't do that. Let me see, what are your concerns?'" Then they get her to think about what the candidates have to say about those issues.

They also encourage critical thinking, fully aware of political realities. "When there is an election," Ms. D'Jama observes, "politicians will talk nice and try to satisfy you."

Ms. Cermeno agrees. "They speak very nicely -- and say nothing." Both women make it clear that they will keep asking questions until they hear real responses. And CAWI, in fact, offers guidelines for evaluating candidates' responses.

But CAWI's work will continue after the election is over -- as long as there is funding, at least, to keep it alive.

At this time of federal cutbacks, Ms. Doerge confesses that she and the other CAWI women are worried, especially after Status of Women's recent "administrative cuts." They have their funds until next May, she says. After that, it's anybody's guess, although she can't understand why they would be targeted.

"We're really not very radical. I mean, we work with the city."

And, in a variety of ways large and small, they hope to change that city, reviving awareness in everyone from the mayor to the councillors to the municipal employees who make things happen. They want to ensure that all planning incorporates a fundamental question: "Will this project in any way inhibit the inclusion of particular groups -- and, if so, what can be done to change it so that they will be included?" It's really not that difficult, she says.

"It doesn't always mean money, either. Sometimes it just means thinking differently."

And sometimes it means wearing a bold peach scarf.

Janice Kennedy is a senior writer at the Citizen.