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FIGHTING THEN AND FIGHTING NOW



Sonia Pressman Fuentes is the author of the memoir, “Eat First —You Don’t Know What They’ll Give You, The Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter,” along with many essays and articles about women’s rights issues and other topics featured in publications throughout the world. Photos by Tyler Whitson and Arielle Scherr

WOMEN’S RIGHTS PIONEERS STRIVE TO INFLUENCE AND INSPIRE A NEW GENERATION

By Tyler Whitson
Contributing Writer

When Sarasota resident Sonia Pressman Fuentes awoke on Nov. 7, she was ecstatic at the news from the night before.

The renowned women’s rights activist, author, lawyer and accomplished feminist pioneer who helped found the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966 — and the first female attorney in the Office of the General Counsel at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission — found the 2012 election had proven to be an historic one for women and women’s equality activists.

The 113th Congress will include an unprecedented number of women, breaking records

for both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate will boast 20 female members, while the House will welcome at least 81.

Additionally, New Hampshire will be the first state ever with an all-female congressional delegation and governor.

Women’s issues such as equal pay, reproductive rights, preventative healthcare and medical privacy rights had been brought to the forefront of the political debate. By defeating numerous candidates with extreme views on abortion and rape, such as U.S. Rep. Todd Akin, R-Mo., and Indiana State Treasurer Rich-

ard Mourdock, the majority of voters across the United States demonstrated they do not want legislators to limit women's rights to make decisions about their bodies.

In Florida, voters rejected proposed constitutional Amendment 6, which would have banned the use of public funds to pay for abortions or health insurance that covers abortions within the state — although this is already federal policy — and it would have removed the procedure from the privacy protections guaranteed in the Florida Constitution.

"I feel as I did when the U.S. Supreme Court issued *Brown v. Board of Education*," Fuentes wrote to her friends and supporters the morning after the election, referring to the landmark 1954 decision that declared it unconstitutional for states to impose laws mandating separate public schools for black and white students.

The mood was a bit different a few hours earlier, though, when *The Sarasota News Leader* sat down with Fuentes before the polls closed to discuss the present day's most important women's issues and how they relate to strides made in the past. Although there was an air of uncertainty about the election outcomes, it was clear to Fuentes that, regardless of who would be leading the country and what ballot amendments would be enforced in the near future, very much still would need to be done before equality for women could be viewed as a reality.

It seems to many, in fact, that women's rights have been facing visceral attacks from conservative candidates and groups over at least the past two years. There have been attempts, for example, to defund Planned Parenthood, to require women seeking abortions to undergo invasive transvaginal ultrasound procedures and —through the Sanctity of Human



(From left) The "Countdown to Election 2012" official panelists included Dr. Bonnie Greenball Silvestri, Dr. Scott Perry, Sonia Pressman Fuentes and Dr. Frank Alcock. They later were joined by attorney Adam Tebrugge, who at the time was running to represent District 71 in the Florida House of Representatives. Tebrugge took Alcock's place after Alcock had to leave for another engagement.

Life Act — to reclassify the fertilized egg as a living person by establishing that life begins at conception, which would make it possible for states to criminalize abortion and in vitro fertilization. Many activists have interpreted these endeavors and their varied levels of success as part of a concerted effort to roll back women's rights. The actions often are referred to in the news media as a "war on women."

Asked her thoughts on that viewpoint, Fuentes replied sharply. "You'd have to be deaf, dumb and blind not to know that there's a war on women by the Republican Party. I think it has made feminists angry, doing all they can to see that Barack Obama is re-elected."

A FEMINIST ICON

Not quite three weeks before the election, a personal friend of Fuentes and another feminist pioneer came to St. Petersburg to address some of the same issues Fuentes discussed with the *News Leader*.

Author and journalist Gloria Steinem spoke on Oct. 20 during a pro-choice rally organized by the "I Am Choice" campaign in opposition to Florida's proposed constitutional Amendment 6.

The many attendees were enthusiastic and vocal in their support, cheering loudly when Steinem proclaimed a sentiment they shared. The crowd comprised women and men of diverse ages and races.

Steinem voiced her concerns about ultra social conservatives' efforts to use the Republican Party as a vehicle to enact legislation that already has impacted or would infringe on the rights of women.

"It is so dangerous to have one of our two great parties controlled by extremists ... because, when we naturally are not 100 percent happy with one group, we just vote for the other one without understanding that we are voting against ourselves," she said. "The great centrist Republican Party needs to come back," she added, reminding audience members of a few of the more progressive, pro-equality views that Republican presidents of the past have expressed.

Of the many issues Steinem discussed at the rally, comparable pay for women was at the forefront. "It happens that equal pay for women of all races is the greatest economic stimulus that this country could ever have," she said to enthusiastic applause. "I have never ever seen, even in the Eisenhower era, anybody who refused to say they were for equal pay! Even if they didn't do anything about it, they at least said they were for equal pay," she continued, referring to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney's evasive responses to questions about his stance on equal pay for women and the Lilly Ledbetter Act of 2009, which helps women who have lost wages as a result of pay discrimination in the past to legally recuperate their losses.

Steinem also focused considerable attention on attempts by conservatives to enact legislation to reclassify the fertilized egg as a person and the major consequences this would have for women. It would "effectively nationalize women's bodies throughout our childbearing years" and "give the government the right to legally search our wombs to see if we were pregnant or not," she said. "If you think that's impossible, think about the transvaginal probe that is legalized rape!"

Steinem received a fervent ovation when she summed up her overall views on personhood with a pithy statement targeting two issues: “Neither the corporation nor the fertilized egg is a person,” she declared.

NO LETTING UP

Fuentes also was publicly vocal in her concerns about women’s issues during the 2012 election. Soon after returning from Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, where she was invited to speak about the women’s rights movement and the problems that remain, she took off to the Half Shell Oyster House on Main Street in Sarasota to participate in a “Count-down to Election 2012” panel discussion for

college students about the election, voting rights and issues of equality. The event was organized and moderated by Bonnie Greenball Silvestri, senior fellow for arts, culture and civic engagement at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee.

Fuentes explained to the audience both the victories and the shortcomings of the past four years in terms of women’s rights, clearing up misconceptions.

In an interview following the panel’s discussions, Fuentes went into deeper detail about those issues. She prefaced her remarks with the point that, although she considers herself to be a lifelong liberal Democrat, a supporter



Many at the “I Am Choice” rally were volunteers and interns helping to raise funds for local and national campaigns.

of President Obama and an outspoken critic of the Republican Party's current policies regarding women's issues — describing the difference between the views of the 2012 election's presidential candidates as a “chasm” — she refuses to let partisanship anesthetize her passion for women's equality.

“As a feminist activist since 1963, I have also been disappointed in [President] Barack Obama, in his wife, Michelle, and in [Vice President] Joe Biden and his wife, Jill,” Fuentes said.

One of the greatest disappointments she has had in the president and those close to him has been their failure to advocate for the

Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution. Originally written and introduced in Congress in 1923, it would guarantee equal rights for women.

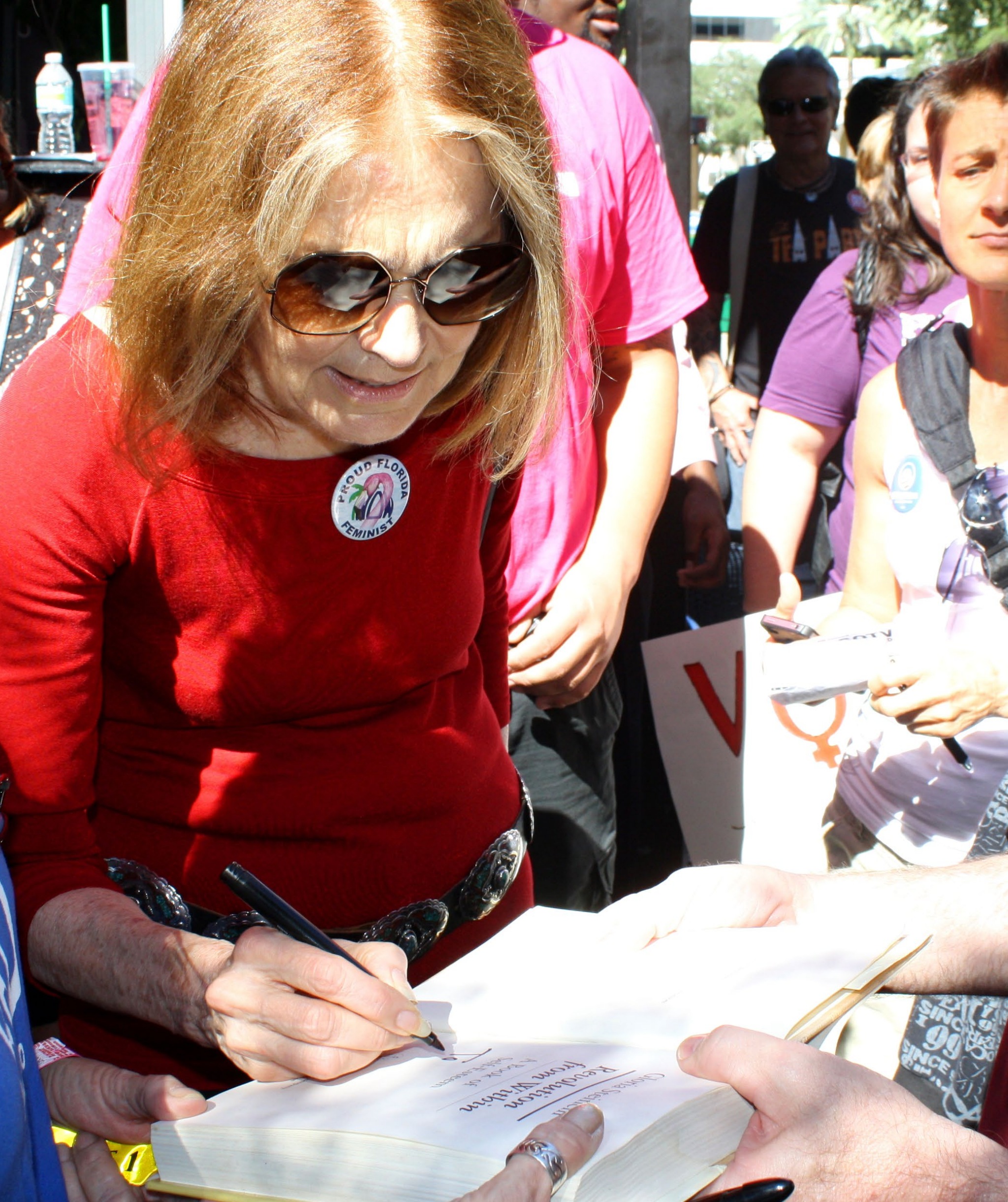
“Since Alice Paul drafted the Equal Rights Amendment, women have been fighting to get it ratified,” Fuentes continued.

She expressed frustration that although the Democratic Party has included it in its national platform, none of the individuals she mentioned earlier has “said the first word” about the ERA since Obama was inaugurated.

Another critical issue Fuentes pointed to is the lack of federal legislation that would guar-



Before meeting with fans following her speech, Gloria Steinem posed for a photo with Planned Parenthood volunteers who helped organize the “I Am Choice” rally.



Gloria Steinem was happy to set aside time to meet with excited fans, sign books and pose for photos outside the location of the "I Am Choice" rally.

antee women are paid the same salaries as men for completing equivalent work.

“[President] Obama keeps trumpeting the fact that the first bill he signed was the Lilly Ledbetter Act,” she said. “I’m delighted that that’s the case, but it only involves a wrinkle in the interpretation of the way Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is interpreted. It corrected a loophole ... but women still only make 77 cents on every dollar that men make. This affects not only their current salary and wages, but their pensions. Over a lifetime they lose hundreds of thousands of dollars,” she continued. “At the rate we’re going, to make it the same, it’s going to take forever ... More needs to be done to make equal pay a reality.”

Among the additional issues Fuentes mentioned — though she said there were many others — were the lack of a mandate to guarantee paid maternity leave and the failure of the United States to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which was adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly as an international bill of rights for women and ratified by every industrialized country in the world except the United States.

Asked what people can do to help forward the cause of women’s rights, Fuentes offered a number of suggestions.

“If they are parents, they need to raise their male and female children equally and teach those children that they both have the same opportunities, they both have the same potential,” she said. For those who are not parents, the most important first step is to collaborate with other advocates. “I always urge people

to join organizations that are fighting for what they believe in,” she said. “It is very hard to do something to change the society alone. You can write, which I do; you can speak, which I do; but you also need to join with like-minded people.”

Some of the organizations she suggested people join are NOW and UN Women, which has a large chapter in Sarasota, as well as women’s chapters of professional groups and unions.

Regardless of how one goes about doing it, Fuentes wants to remind people that fighting for women’s rights is as important today as it ever has been, although it may not be quite as obvious.

“The battle is more difficult now, because it’s dealing in some cases with subtleties and nuances. In the early days, in the 1960s, everybody could see the discrimination against women in employment, in getting into colleges and universities, in not being allowed to serve on juries — everything,” she said. “Now, a lot of people think, ‘What are you still carrying on about? Haven’t you accomplished everything?’”

There is still much to be accomplished in the fight for equal rights and equality for women, of course, Fuentes explained, so helping others to be vigilant in fighting present-day discrimination and inequality is of ever-increasing importance.

That is why, even after decades on the front lines, Fuentes and Steinem continue to push forward. Fuentes says she is excited about seeing individuals of all backgrounds do the same. 