

NOW Conference: Action, Inspiration and Connection

NOW held its 2011 National Conference in sunny Tampa, Fla., June 24-26. Hundreds of feminists from around the country gathered to share ideas and strategize to stop the ongoing war on women by the right wing in Congress. The conference theme, *Daring to Dream: Building a Feminist Future*, challenged activists to create a feminist blueprint for the world.

The conference kicked off with an emergency rally outside of Sen. Marco Rubio's (R-Fla.) office, located right next door to the conference hotel. Rubio, a Tea Party favorite, voted for a proposed GOP budget that would cut or destroy programs critical to women. Conference attendees marched outside in extreme heat to send a message to the senator: "Hands off Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare," and "Women need jobs, not cuts."

The rally helped enthuse and engage participants for the inspiring and motivating weekend ahead. They had the opportunity to engage in 35 workshops covering a variety of topics, including single-payer health care, the intersection of eco-feminism and racial justice, creating a positive abortion rights narrative, and Islam and women's rights. The workshops also included a political track and an organizing track for attendees who wanted more in-depth information and skill building in these areas.

The general sessions included a number of superb speakers and honorees from all walks of life. Among them were Dr. Nancy Klimas, who received NOW Foundation's Victoria J. Mastrobuono Women's Health Award. Klimas is a professor of Medicine, Psychology, and Microbiology and Immunology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. She has pioneered research on chronic fatigue syndrome and has worked on behalf of women and women's health care for more than a quarter of a century.

Olga Vives, former NOW executive vice president and action vice president, was honored with a Woman of Action award. During her tenure at the National NOW Action Center, Vives took the lead on major events and issues, such as naming Wal-Mart a Merchant of Shame, advocating for equal marriage, promoting justice for immigrant women, and helping lead the historic 2004 March for Women's Lives, which brought more than one million abortion rights supporters to Washington, D.C.

NOW also recognized Sonia Pressman Fuentes, a founder of NOW and longtime women's rights advocate. Fuentes is the author of "Eat First, You Don't Know What They'll Give You, the Adventures of an Immigrant Family and Their Feminist Daughter."

One of the foremost advocates of gender equality in education, Nancy Hogshead-Makar, was named a Woman of Courage honoree. She currently teaches sports law courses at the Florida Coastal School of Law and co-authored the acclaimed book "Equal Play, Title IX and Social Change."

NOW was also pleased to present Girls Incorporated of Pinellas, Fla., with the first-ever Girl-Powered Media Award for their outstand-

ing documentary, *Being Safe In Our World*. Girls Inc. is a nonprofit organization that inspires girls to reach their full potential. This particular group of girls produced a video about a sexually exploitative billboard in their town as part of a summer camp media program when they were nine and 10 years old. Response to the video was overwhelmingly positive, and it sparked an important discussion in the community.

An exciting line-up of speakers, from the esteemed and hilarious Patricia Schroeder to the fiery Dr. Maya Rockey Moore, guaranteed that each plenary session was a one of a kind experience.

Of course, networking and connecting with other feminists is always a key element of the NOW conference. This year, attendees of all ages cut loose with a wildly successful dance party on Saturday night.

The final day of the conference was filled



A group from Girls Inc. of Pinellas, Fla., accepted NOW's first-ever Girl-Powered Media Award for their documentary, *Being Safe in Our World*, at the 2011 National NOW Conference in Tampa this June.

with debate and voting on resolutions, which are the guiding force behind NOW and form the basis of the organization's policy. Some of the resolutions passed this year include pressing for reproductive civil rights legislation, using Title IX action networks to help end sex discrimination in education, and ensuring inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in the U.S. Department of State programming.

Speaker videos, photos and resolutions can be found at: www.now.org/conference.

Positive Step in Effort to Prevent, Address Sexual Assault on Campus

The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights released a guidance letter to schools, colleges and universities, reminding them of their responsibilities under Title IX to prevent and address sexual violence. NOW cheered this new initiative, which was introduced by Vice President Joe Biden in April.

Schools are encouraged to address the topic of sexual violence in orientation programs for new students, faculty, employees, residence hall advisors, coaches and student athletes and at assemblies or "back-to-school nights."

The letter emphasizes that Title IX coordinators must be trained on how to properly report and respond to allegations of sexual harassment and violence. It also stresses that grievance or disciplinary procedures should not cause any undue delay and should work not only to eliminate the immediate problem, but also to prevent its recurrence.

Perhaps most importantly for complainants of sexual violence or harassment on school campuses, the letter offers two important clarifications. First, it spells out the remedies that schools should be prepared to offer students once a complaint has been made. These include (but are not limited to) having the opportunity to switch classes or residence situations, counseling or medical services, and the provision of an escort to protect against retaliation.

Secondly, the Department of Education clari-

fied the burden of proof by which schools should judge allegations of sexual violence. Some schools use the standard of "clear and convincing evidence," which requires that adjudicators be convinced that it was reasonably certain (or highly probable) that sexual harassment or violence occurred. However, the Department of Education clarified that this standard is not in line with Title IX, and the correct standard of proof for violations of civil rights laws is the "preponderance of the evidence" standard, which asks if it was more likely than not that sexual harassment or violence occurred.

Finally, the Department of Education clarified that while it might be in the school's best interest, mediation between a victim and the alleged perpetrator is never appropriate for complaints of sexual assault, even on a voluntary basis. NOW, on its own and with the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, has been working tirelessly on Title IX since its adoption and strongly supports the guidelines from the Department of Education.

These clarifications are an important step in helping our nation's educational institutions become environments free from sexual violence, harassment and discrimination. With nearly 4,000 incidents of sexual battery, 800 rapes and attempted rapes and 3,300 forcible sex offenses reported on school campuses over the past four years, it is none too soon.