An Update on D.C. Voting Rights Project

By Anita Warmflash, D.C. Voting Rights Committee Member

The D.C. Voting Rights Project committee is actively planning for educational outreach and increased public awareness of the denial of full voting rights for residents of Washington, D.C.

Announcements of speakers for the March 29 public meeting will be made in the near future. A Power Point presentation is almost complete and will be available to League volunteers who will speak to community meetings and organizations.

Posters and literature are now available for distribution. League members are urged to contact the office and volunteer to post them at convenient locations in their neighborhoods. In these ways, as well as others still in the planning stage, we expect to fulfill our pledge to build public awareness of the disenfranchisement of DC voters.

An interview with Eli Zigas, a volunteer with DC Vote, an organization founded in 1998, gave a firsthand account of his involvement with this issue and their efforts to educate the public and advocate for change. Eli, who now lives in Walla Walla, is a native of D.C. Eli became involved with DC Vote in his senior year in high school when he realized that residents of D.C. lacked the voting rights which other citizens of the U.S. take for granted as their inalienable right.

Zigas’ first effort was distributing literature to youths who were attending a national conference. This experience made him aware that the rest of the country is largely unaware of the restrictions on voting rights for D.C. residents, who can only vote for mayor, their city council and in presidential elections, but are denied a voting representative in Congress. Upon graduating from high school, Eli worked for DC Vote for several months until his departure for college. It was evident from my talk with him that his years at Grinnell College and recent relocation to Walla Walla have in no way diminished his concern about the situation in D.C. nor altered his commitment to a cause for which change is long overdue.

Mr. Zigas expressed admiration for the efforts that the Seattle League and other state Leagues have undertaken. He feels that if the situation in which D.C. residents find themselves were widely known throughout the United States, they would undoubtedly have wide support in their struggle to rectify the injustice of their restricted voting rights. A more educated citizenry, plus some bi-partisan support in the previous Congress, and changes in the present Congress are making him more hopeful about prospects for change.

The decision of the Seattle League to apply for the grant which is funding this project is therefore timely and continues the League’s tradition of educating the public on important matters of citizenship and civil rights.
Equal Rights for Washingtonians
By Eli Zigas, D.C. Voting Rights Activist

You’re a Washingtonian. You pay your taxes. You show up for federal jury duty. You know family, friends, and neighbors who have been called upon to serve in the military. You’re an American and you fulfill your duties of citizenship.

Yet you have no say in how your $5.5 billion in federal tax dollars are spent. The laws you are expected to enforce as a juror in federal court were passed without consideration of your opinion. You know that four Washingtonians have died serving in Iraq and Afghanistan ostensibly spreading democracy to Baghdad and Kabul even though true democracy doesn’t yet exist back home. They paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country despite the fact that no one in Congress is accountable to them when making the decision to go to war. You and your neighbors are treated as second-class citizens because you live in Washington. The other Washington – the District of Columbia.

Despite having more residents than Wyoming, the residents of the District of Columbia have no voting representation in either the U.S. House of Representatives or the Senate. Although they fulfill all the obligations of U.S. citizenship, the more than half million Americans living in our nation’s capital are represented in Congress by only one delegate in the House. The newly elected Democratic Congress recently reinstated a limited procedural vote for D.C.’s delegate and the delegates representing the territories, with the caveat that no delegate’s vote can ever be used to break a tie. In other words, when the delegate’s vote would count the most, it doesn’t count. Without full voting representation on Capitol Hill, residents of D.C. fight against something most Americans left behind after the Revolutionary War: Taxation without representation.

District residents have been working to regain equal citizenship for over two centuries. And the only times they have been successful in achieving a step forward is when they have had help from Washingtonians like you – the ones living in a state, with a representative and two Senators in Congress. Any effort to grant District residents their civil rights will require congressional action. Congress will be involved whether the proposal is a constitutional amendment, statehood, retrocession, or a simple bill like the bi-partisan D.C. Voting Rights Act (H.R. 328), which would grant D.C. a vote in the House. This means your members of Congress will have to decide whether or not to support democracy for the Washingtonians who live just beyond Capitol Hill. The best way to ensure that they support democracy in our nation’s capital is if you tell them that it’s important to you. Your members of Congress don’t pay much attention to the concerns of District residents. But they do care about what their Washingtonians are thinking.

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The most valuable thing that you can do to help D.C. residents gain voting representation is to exercise the rights you have that they don’t. Contact your members of Congress. Meet with them when they come back home. Write a letter to the editor calling on them to support D.C. voting rights. By doing so, you’ll move us one step closer to ensuring that all Washingtonians living in America enjoy the same rights.

Eli Zigas, born and raised in Washington, D.C., wrote his thesis on the history and politics of democracy in the District. He recently moved to Walla Walla and looks forward to enjoying democracy in Washington state.