

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

April 18, 2002

Women in Government

Last week I had the pleasure of meeting at First Church with combined Brownie and Girl Scout Troops. The Scouts are working on a merit badge dealing with women in government, and they had invited me to share my experiences. It was time well spent.

This is not your mother's scout troop, and it's not at all like the program from my own Scouting days. Instead of green uniforms, they have sashes. And the Girl Scout program has a very different direction. The sashes display many merit badges, but instead of a focus on camping and domestic skills, badges prepare the girls for careers. Careers are reason for my invitation.

They wanted to know if a woman could be elected President, so I responded with the names of women from other nations who have headed their governments. Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher have demonstrated leadership qualifications to the world, and I believe an American woman can follow their examples.

The toughest question of the afternoon came from a fourth grader asked why she had to take MCAS. Third and fourth graders had just completed their annual test period. I explained the tests and that the state wants to be sure children throughout Massachusetts are receiving the same education. I was happy to see that the girls, though relieved that the tests were over, did not seem to be stressed by their administration.

I talked about my entry to politics as a Longmeadow School Committee member and of the subconscious role in my own career played by grandmother, who was a member of the Missouri state legislature at the time I was a Girl Scout. The words "role model" have seemed overworked to me, but I realize looking back that my classmates did not have a grandmother who worked at the state capital and debated public policy at family gatherings. My exposure to such a grandmother opened expanded options to me. I hope the Longmeadow Girl Scouts gained some confidence by their informal discussion with their State Representative.

They asked, "What does a State Representative do?" I had already talked about legislative sessions. So I talked about answering questions for their parents, working to develop new laws, attending events such as their own DARE graduations. And, just as important, I talk with girls just as I was talking with them about everything I do.