

## **Making Democracy Work Award: Barbara A. Seals Nevergold, Ph.D.**

*Dr. Barbara A. Seals Nevergold, outgoing president of the Buffalo Board of Education, received the League's Making Democracy Work Award at our annual meeting on June 1, 2019. These are her remarks:*

Thank you for the honor of being recognized with the prestigious Making Democracy Work Award. This organization represents the longstanding tenacity, dedication, perseverance and ultimate power and purpose that women have in ensuring that the principles of a democratic society are sustained. I believe that this country is going to be saved by women like you, who are playing critical roles in the political, civic and social arenas in our nation. Many of you are the role models for younger women, who continue the tradition you've established. Special thanks to Joan Simmons! *[Editor's note: Joan made the nomination for this year's award.]*

Thank you, also, for the opportunity to have a dialogue with you about some of the challenges and what I hope are accomplishments that I've experienced during a five-decade career. I look forward to what some are calling a "retirement" - I think it's my third or fourth retirement, thus far. At any rate, whatever one wants to call it, it's certainly my time for reflection and taking stock.

My formal biography elaborates the twists and turns of my career. I've been fortunate to work in jobs which are, seemingly, in very different disciplines - junior high school French teacher, elementary, secondary and post-secondary school counselor, foster care social worker and administrator, women's health care CEO, college professor, community non-profit leader and founder, and soon-to-be-former Buffalo Board of Education member. But I often point out, especially to young people, that these positions were unified by service to and focus on children and families. And I tell them that I was self-confident in my ability to master these different fields because I relied on transferable skills. But that's not the complete story.

I want to circle back to my biography briefly and share with you a little about my upbringing. My parents, Rev. Willie B. and Mrs. Clara Seals, were emigrants in the Second Great Migration Movement of World War II. In 1947, they left everything they knew in Louisiana to secure a better life for me and my four older siblings. At first the seven of us lived in a two-bedroom cold-water flat, with a shared hallway toilet and sink AND with my aunt, uncle and cousin. When they moved, our family - all seven of us - had the flat all to ourselves! Neither of my parents went to high school but they valued education. My father, who was a minister, was a lifelong learner who pursued ministerial studies. He also was a self-taught photographer and taught piano

and organ. Both parents expected and demanded that we apply ourselves to our studies. There was never a question that I would go to college and I was the first college graduate in the family, though not the last.

Just one more tidbit about my upbringing that I think has bearing on my work ethic. After our move to Buffalo, my parents had four more children, all boys. In growing up as the older sister, and maybe there are those in the audience who can identify with this, I became **the** babysitter for these siblings. Perhaps you've heard the term "parentified child"! That was me! At the time, I considered this an imposition. Frankly my little brothers were a pain in the neck. Having the distance of time, however, I see that being given that responsibility was a sign of the confidence that my parents had in my maturity and ability AND family took care of family. So I can say without a doubt that the roots of any leadership qualities that are ascribed to me began with my parents at 266 Walnut Street in Buffalo. Sorry for such a long preamble, but I want to credit my parents for their great influence on and nurturance of their of their children.

I know that many of you want to hear about the Buffalo Board of Education and what I see as the current and future direction of this critical body. With the previous backdrop in mind, let me tell you how I got to the BOE. In 2011, now Senator Chris Jacobs had just been elected to the County Clerk's Office and his seat on the board was open. A friend, and also board member, Mary Ruth Kapsiak, suggested I apply and interview for the position. I was selected from a field of 13 candidates and took office in January 2012. I found a district that had just lost its superintendent, Dr. James Williams, and was being led by an interim, Ms. Amber Dixon. Unfortunately, Ms. Dixon was the first of seven superintendents or interim superintendents we had during the first four years of my tenure. In addition, the New York State Department of Education had instituted a new accountability system that changed the passing scores for graduation. Much like the Common Core Standards that were implemented in 2013, the district's graduation scores plummeted to 48%, and with 44 of 58 schools cited for low performance, the district was labeled as "failing." Further, the teachers union had not agreed to a new contract for over a decade. And the lack of stable leadership definitely contributed to the problems we had adequately addressing student achievement.

Obviously, there is a much more complicated and detailed accounting than I can give during this presentation, but overall I can say that during my first four years on the board, the district's relationship with SED deteriorated to the point that a Distinguished Educator was appointed by the state in 2012, the same year that Dr. Pamela Brown was hired as our new superintendent. The following year, a new board was elected that included Carl Paladino. The Paladino majority proceeded to undermine Dr. Brown, demanded her resignation and single-handedly, without the knowledge or input of the four

minority female members of the board, hired a new superintendent. To say there was dissension and ongoing internal board conflict is putting it mildly. To add to the DRAMA and ongoing destabilization of the district, the board majority unveiled plans to turn over several of our most iconic school buildings to charter schools (I'll address the charter issue later). These years were some of the most challenging and unproductive years in our district. I wrote a weekly column and blog entitled **Board Matters: Buffalo Schools at the Crossroads** to document and voice the frustrations of the period. One day that might be a book.

I am pleased to note, however, that significant and positive changes have taken place since 2016. I can point to several examples, which have been instrumental in shaping the district we have today: the school board election of 2016, which changed the voting majority of the board; the unpleasant but justified fight to remove Mr. Paladino from the board; and the hiring of Dr. Kriner Cash in 2016. Dr. Cash has led the district, guided by the New Education Bargain, our strategic plan that has brought stability and innovation to the district. Working with this plan, the superintendent and the board have turned the district around and moved many of the “failing” schools into “schools of good standing”; established creative and inclusive programs such as the community schools; offered extended educational opportunities; increased parental engagement; and have a robust partnership with Say Yes to Education Buffalo, which has helped us implement programs that serve the whole child; e.g., health and wellness. A new teachers contract was finally negotiated that improved relations with teachers, and the graduation rate is moving up to 64%. Finally, the board has been more focused on systems change and making critical policy decisions.

But the system still has numerous challenges: critically, how do we ensure equity for all our students? It's no secret as it's an ongoing topic of board discussions that there is an imbalance in the system between schools where students are achieving at a high level and schools where they are not. Some accuse the district of having a two-tiered system. Implementing equal access to programs in music, arts and workforce development, for example, is an ongoing concern. We continue to see an amazing growth in ENL students and meeting their needs takes extraordinary resources. In addition, many of our students live in poverty. That's not an excuse for poor student achievement, but the reality is the connection between the two is documented by credible research. A personal goal that I've had since joining the board is to advocate for changes in the standardized test system. I believe that these tests are biased, not diagnostic, but they carry tremendous weight in the assessment of our schools and district as failing or not. The Opt Out Movement was launched in response to these and other issues with the tests and has succeeded in forcing numerous changes by the state to address these problems.

As for charter schools: I'm not opposed to charter schools. They do provide choice but, at this point, the region is oversaturated with charter schools, with new ones being approved by SUNY or SED each year. Contrary to popular belief, most charters do not perform better than the Buffalo schools and do not serve the population of students who require the greatest resources - e.g., special needs and ENL students - to the same extent as the public schools. They are also able to select the students they will continue to educate and send students back to the district at critical times, such as just before accountability testing.

Future: Maintaining the Education Bargain and continuing to implement its tenets with fidelity is very important. I firmly believe that the stability resulting from the Education Bargain and the leadership of the superintendent and board are major contributors to ensuring the educational achievement of our students, and fundamental to maintaining the progress we've made. I think that the new board, being constituted of five returning board members, will have the ability to continue the upward movement that is ongoing at this time. Also, two of the four new board members have been active for several years in two of our major parent groups, the BPTO and SEPAC (Special Education Parents Advisory Council) so they begin with a shorter learning curve.

I will leave the board on June 30 with mixed emotions. The gap created by the freedom from attending meetings every Wednesday night; monthly meetings with the superintendent, Say Yes to Education Buffalo and other committees; school programs, telephone calls and emails from students, parents and community members, etc., will be hard to fill! But I am looking forward to using the time to invigorate my Uncrowned Queens Institute. That organization that I co-founded with Dr. Peggy Brooks-Bertram has begun to create new programming aimed at boosting our core mission - the documentation, preservation and dissemination of regional African American history. I am pleased to recognize one of our board members, Mrs. Desiree Breckenridge-Jean. An upcoming program involves students from the Buffalo Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts, who are staging a performance of our play, based on our award-winning book, **Go, Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady**. I have flyers, and hope some of you will join us on June 12.

In closing, thank you for this opportunity and again for this honor.