



# Soaring For Our Veterans...

## President Laurel DuBois

I think back to when I was young – my first memory of The American Legion was that it was where my father stopped on Friday evenings on his way home from work for just a “quick beer” or maybe two! It wasn’t until I was much older that I realized there is a great deal more to this organization and there was even a woman’s auxiliary!

It wasn’t until 1997, when Steve and I first moved to Wisconsin, that I next gave any thought to this organization. When we arrived in Balsam Lake, Steve was determined to become active in the American Legion, so he joined Post 278, and really wanted me to go with him. In all honesty, I wasn’t especially enthusiastic about the idea. It took me a year to finally say I would go. I told him as his birthday gift, I would attend a meeting with him. As it turned out this was the best gift I ever gave myself.

I went with Steve to another meeting about a month later I sat there, not knowing anyone, watching this amazing woman as she took control of the room and the women in it. She finally spotted me sitting there. She introduced herself as the District President. When I told her this was my first district meeting, she said she would explain the various programs and I could choose which I would work on – now, she didn’t ask me if I wanted to work on a program, *however she did give me the choice about which program I would contribute to* ... That woman’s name was Gayle Jansen and that was the start of a long and wonderful friendship.

Over the years, Gayle and I have attended many meetings and conventions together. She has taught me so much and has been a great role model. Now she is in her mid 80s, and I can almost keep up with her. I have admired her skills as a leader and her strength as a woman. Thank you, Gayle, for walking this fabulous journey with me.

Another woman that has taught me much is Jan (Pulvermacher-Ryan). I remember the first time she approached me. It was at my first State convention. I was sitting alone. She simply walked up and asked if it was my first convention. I told her it was. She told me her story of her first convention...sitting alone and being unsure of herself and how much it had helped to have someone come up and welcome her into the group. By sharing her story, she made me feel so much better. I want to continue her tradition and always try to welcome those that are new and let them know how much their presence is appreciated.

Due to women like Gayle and Jan, I not only felt welcomed but I wanted to be more involved. Over the next 18 years, I am happy to say, many of the American Legion and Auxiliary programs have touched something deep in my soul. I was able to tap into my life experience to effectively hold positions such as Membership Chairman, Chaplin, Historian, and programs like VA & R and Poppies. Spending time working on these programs, with so

many exceptional women, has helped me to grow in confidence and has helped to enrich my life. It is gratifying to know we are having a positive impact on our Veterans, their families, and our communities. I have been truly blessed to be able to participate in so many ways.

I have to admit there were a couple of these programs that I really didn't think would interest me. Again, I have Gayle to thank for "encouraging" me to try new things whether or not I wanted to! When she told me she had signed me up for the "Legislative" program, I couldn't believe it. I told her, "You know I don't want to participate in that!" And with a wicked little smile, she responded, "That is exactly why I signed you up for it!" I can honestly say that I am glad I did – I know I received as much or more than I gave – sometimes my ideas worked and other times I had to remember Gayle's lesson that everyone makes mistakes – learn from them, think positive, and try something different! This is how we develop and grow stronger. Someone's new idea just may be crazy enough to work!

I know that every woman working within these programs brings her own unique set of skills; whether she has been a member for decades or for a day. Working together and sharing ideas can only make our organization stronger.

One thing I think most of us can agree on is that we have seen a decline in our numbers. We all would like to see this turn around. Between jobs, taking care of the house and driving children around, women today do not have much "free" time. So how do we get them to see that the American Legion Auxiliary is a wonderful and productive use of their time? First we have to invite them to attend a meeting. Then we have to welcome them into our great organization.

I have to think back to some of those very first meetings I attended. Where women like Gayle and Jan took the time to make me, a new member, feel welcome. Their simple "hello" and warm hospitality, was enough to get me to come back for another meeting and another meeting.

That first meeting and welcome began this journey. Along the way I have learned so much, and I have formed many lasting friendships. This path has led me to where I stand today – here, before you as your new president. If someone would have told me 20 years ago, I would someday be doing this, I would not have believed them.

It is my hope that we will work together to welcome the new members among us. It is not only a good use of their time but it will benefit them in ways they cannot imagine. People want to belong to a group that makes them feel welcome, that listens to their ideas, and helps them to develop their abilities – even to discover new ones. Who wouldn't want to be part of it? And we can start this process with a simple "hello".

I am so grateful for this opportunity to be a leader and a servant of this community. Please know that I want to help each of you in this organization to the best of my ability. I will listen. I will share my knowledge. I will learn with you and from you... and... I will say "hello".