

Looking Forward

Celebration, optimism at Women's March



By Mark James Miller, Jan. 25, 2019

Women's Marches took place all over the United States on Jan. 19, but the one in Santa Maria was unique in that it was the first to be held in the All-America City.

"Today's event is all about empowerment," said Lawanda Lyons-Pruitt, president of the Santa Maria/Lompoc NAACP and one of the planners of the march. "Empowerment of women, empowerment of people of color, empowerment of the people of Santa Maria that haven't been heard before."

"We are building on momentum created by the 2018 election," said Eve Didion, another march organizer, at a planning meeting a few days before the event. "The march will be a celebration of what has been achieved so far and preparing us for what needs to be done in the future."

That celebratory feeling was combined with a sense of optimism and determination before the march began. As people began gathering in Buena Vista Park for the rally that preceded the march they were greeted by the Santa Maria High School marching band playing "Land Of A Thousand Dances." Colorful balloons adorned the speakers' platform, and Jesse Fuentes from the House of Pride and Equity quickly informed the crowd this was a historic moment.

"You are part of history," she said. "This is a response to (President) Trump and his anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, anti-woman agenda. We are joining with others around the world to march for justice."

More than 100 marches took place in the U.S. on Saturday. Born out of the shock of Trump's election two years ago, the marches are widely seen as playing a major role in the women's wave of 2018, which saw unprecedented numbers of women running for and being elected to public office.

The appearance of one of these women, newly-elected Santa Maria City Councilwoman Gloria Soto, electrified the crowd, which chanted, "Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!" as she came to the microphone.

"Today is a day of celebration," she said, "for we are living in a time of hope and promise."

She noted the struggle is not for women only, that men have a role to play in it too.

"Men must step up, speak out, and accept women as equals," she said.

Gloria's election has been described by many as a game-changer, illustrative of what people can do when they are determined to make something happen. As the crowd left Buena Vista Park to begin the march, that sense of *Si se puede* was omnipresent, and there was definite elan in their step and in the way they waved at cars going by. Signs reading, "End The Shutdown," "I March For My Daughter" and "Together We Rise" were everywhere.

The Aretha Franklin classic "Respect" was playing when the marchers arrived at Minami Park, waiting to hear from speakers such as Congressman Salud Carbajal and 3rd District Supervisor Joan Hartmann. Volunteers handed out information on California's Every Woman Counts program, offering free mammograms and Pap tests. Others gave out literature describing conditions farm workers face in the fields. Representatives from Allan Hancock College, United Domestic Workers, the Santa Maria/Lompoc NAACP, and United Way were present.

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“Marches have a powerful way of being transformative,” said planner Sarah MacDonald. “People find out new things about themselves.”

If the march on Jan. 19 was any indication, it could be that Santa Maria is on the cusp of discovering new things about itself. As Audy MacDonald of the House of Pride and Equity put it, “There is a progressive buzz in our area. It’s growing every year.”

Mark James Miller is an associate English Instructor at Allan Hancock College, and president of the Part-Time Faculty Association, CFT Local 6185. He can be reached at mark@pfaofahc.com.