

Mother and Daughter in Awe.....and AWE

By Karen Hoenscheid, St. Margaret's Church Plainview

For me, the big red button with the bright yellow letters said it all...AWE. Technically, this is an acronym for Anglican Women's Empowerment, but as far as I'm concerned, it perfectly expressed how I felt after attending the UN Commission on the Status of Women with my 14 year old daughter, Emily.

At this annual conference, women, (and men) from around the world gather to discuss the 12 areas of concern that were laid out as part of the "Beijing Platform for Action" in 1995. This was the 55th time the CSW met, but only the 5th time that girls were included in the discussion. This year, the theme was "Access to Education and Jobs in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) but we attended fascinating workshops and seminars on other issues such as violence towards women, human trafficking, human rights, women's health and our personal "hot-button" issue, women in the media. My eyes were opened and my heart ached from hearing the horror stories of women and girls across the globe. I think this is when the feelings of awe really started to set in. I have great respect and admiration for these women that live with such hardship and are treated so inhumanely, yet they hold their heads up, keep going, bravely share their stories and when able, reach out to help others.

With each person I met, those feelings of awe just deepened. While Emily and I arrived each day via the 6:18 train from Northport, I was impressed with how many people travelled from much farther distances to advocate for the rights of women and girls. We met people from England, Tokyo, Tunisia, Italy and Africa as well as Texas, Kentucky, and Minnesota. And we finally got to meet the two women (coincidentally also from Northport!) that were responsible for our participation. It was Jane Appleyard Roel's amazing article in the June 2010 edition of the Dominion that first got us interested in the CSW and Kim Robey, chair of AWE that brought our interest to fruition! These are truly two awe-inspiring women!

As part of a special Orientation for Girls, we heard passionate speeches from Michelle Bachelet, the former president of Chile who is now the Executive Director of UN Women, and Leymah Gbowee, the subject of the documentary, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell". Ms. Bachelet spoke of how the world financial crisis has had a more severe impact on women and girls, with many families pulling their daughters out of school to help financially. She lamented that women make up two thirds of the world's illiterate adults, a figure that hasn't changed in 20 years. She also suggested that strong female leaders can change cultural attitudes by serving as role models, an idea shared by Ms. Gbowee, who blew me away with her passionate speech. She shared the story of how she got Christian and Muslim women in Liberia to end their country's bloody civil war through non-violent protest and peaceful negotiation. Perhaps most impressive is that she began this movement with just four other women and \$10!!! Ms. Gbowee urged the audience to fight for what we believe in. "If you see an issue and are touched by it, step into it and make a change"! When asked how to choose an issue when there are so many problems throughout the world, she astutely advised to, "sweep at your own feet first", or as my mother would say, "cultivate your own garden." Although she encouraged us to be concerned about global issues, she has found that the most successful initiatives are those that are groomed from within the community, not outside of it.

While Ms. Bachelet and Ms. Gbowee represented the secular world of powerful, passionate women, I was pleased to be in awe of two women from within the leadership of the Episcopal Church as well. On our last day in the city, we attended a Eucharist at the

Episcopal Church Center chapel with Bishop Roskam leading the service. She was so engaging and sincere. I also had the pleasure of hearing Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori speak to about eighty AWE members about being open to diversity and change within our parishes, saying that, "When church becomes a club for those that are already there, it dies...and it should die." She noted that the fastest growing religion is "none of the above", and advised that we "go out into our communities to meet people." Her whole speech was filled with sincerity, humor, intelligence and warmth. What a good feeling it is to have such strong female leaders as role models for other women and girls in the church.

This opportunity to expose Emily to so many strong women and to be amongst like-minded teenagers was one of my main motivations behind bringing her to the CSW. I also wanted her to see that there is a great (or sometimes not so great) big world beyond our white picket fence, Northport High School and the Smith Haven Mall. I wanted to counteract some of the shallow influences that she is exposed to, and to guide her even further towards caring about the things in life that really matter. Like all American teenagers, she is bombarded with destructive images, negative music lyrics, rampant materialism and don't even get me started on what I call "toxic television"... shows like Teen Mom, Jersey Shore, 16 and Pregnant and DeGrassi. The fact that she jumped at the chance to participate without any bribery or arm-twisting makes me extremely proud and yes, in awe of my own daughter. I think it's safe to say that we'll be back next year, proudly wearing the big red buttons with the bright yellow letters saying it all...AWE!

Karen is a lifetime member of St. Margaret's, serving on the Vestry, the Search Committee and is a Sunday School teacher. For information on AWE, see anglicanwomensempowerment.org.