

Women's Symposium Draws Record Crowd

By Lt. j.g. Theresa Donnelly, Special to Diversity Directorate Public Affairs

WASHINGTON (NNS) -- More than 1,000 people – the highest number in history - gathered June 2-3 for the 23rd annual Sea Services Leadership Association (SSLA) women's symposium in Washington, D.C.

The two-day event emphasized significant contributions women are making in the Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps.

"As it applies to the women who serve today, this past year has been a milestone year," said Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Gary Roughead, during his keynote speech at the symposium. "We're going to continue to pursue and look for opportunities for bright young women to be attracted to the Navy, to make the choice to come into the Navy and then to move forward and lead in the Navy."

Some accomplishments highlighted during the symposium included National Defense University President Vice Adm. Ann Rondeau's selection as the first female three-star officer, the selection of the first female flag officer to lead a carrier air wing and strike group and the selection of women for all four 2010 Sailor of the Year Awards. In addition, the Navy Chaplain Corps and Civil Engineering Corps celebrated their first female flag officers.

The 2010 symposium's theme was "Leading from the Front Into the Future" and featured speakers from the corporate sector, retired female flag officers and high-ranking female leadership in the military.

After Capt. Annie Andrews sang the National Anthem, the event kicked off with opening remarks by Juan Garcia, assistant secretary for the Navy's manpower and reserve affairs.

"We literally could not run the Navy and Marine Corps today without women," said Garcia. "What I love about our services is that more so than any other sector of our society, performance is rewarded regardless of background, family history and increasingly, gender. Success is based on your performance and inherent capabilities."

Crucial to many of the military's missions, the event emphasized women serving in humanitarian and disaster relief missions, with a joint military panel of women who had served in Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, Cuba and Haiti.

"The panel was great, I loved listening to all the different experiences and it was a lot of information to keep in mind. I found it interesting how the Navy PT [Physical Training] uniform could be seen as offensive to certain nations and it showed me how we really have to be careful not to be disrespectful when in other countries," said Aviation Mechanic 2nd Class (AW) Maritza Tolentino, stationed at Fleet Readiness Center Southwest in San Diego.

Honoring those who serve, an awards luncheon recognized service members who are making outstanding contributions to the military. Before the ceremony, Maj. Gen. Angela Salinas, director of the Marine Corps Manpower Division, reflected on their accomplishments.

"I'm in a room with so many incredible leaders of our nation. You are the leaders of the

best and the brightest of this country, and I applaud you for taking the step to lead in a time of uncertainty when our nation needs strong leaders like yourselves," said Salinas.

Each service branch met separately to discuss issues affecting their respective services June 3.

Navy panels included a board to discuss Navy uniform initiatives and a panel of male leadership, who are leading change for several policies concerning women in the Navy. Of particular importance to the attendees was the mention of the Navy policy change to assign women to submarines.

"The level of expectations and professionalism within the submarine community is so high, and I think the integration of women on submarines is going to reflect that," said Rear Adm. Barry Bruner, commander of Submarine Group 10.

Bruner further explained that by opening up the aperture to allow female officers to work in submarines, the overall submarine readiness will increase.

The discussions for the panels were honest and frank. Participants were extremely forthright in voicing some of their concerns with current military policies, such if the military is seeking to change the combat exclusion law, how the Navy is going to fully integrate enlisted women on submarines and ways to make the Navy Khaki uniform present a more professional appearance. Not only were women able to share in this networking opportunity, quite a few men attended the symposium.

"We encourage men to participate in the women's leadership symposium, and we see more and more men coming to the symposium each year," said SSLA President Stephanie Miller.

"Women still represent a minority in each of the maritime services, but have a really strong presence in terms of leadership roles and expanding influence. We see men coming to the symposium to learn about what issues are relevant to women in the military and to take that back to their commands," explained Miller.

Each year, the symposium grows in popularity. Plans are already in place to hold the conference March 2011 in San Diego, as this will make attendance easier for those serving on the West coast.

"I have definitely been influenced by all the women leaders here. Sometimes you don't know that there is that many out there, so it was real nice perspective to hear some of their thoughts. This is a great way to connect with other females and have that open forum," said Marine Sgt. Stephanie Ricci, assigned to Marine Headquarters Battalion, Installations and Logistics.

To see photos and additional stories from this year's conference, visit the Navy's Diversity Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/navydiversity>.

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