

Melanie G. Ramey

Melanie Ramey embodies a lesson learned from her mother: "Don't be complacent, brighten the corner where you are." And Melanie put it into practice from an early age.

Growing up in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, she saw discrimination in her hometown. "It was separate but certainly not equal," said Melanie. "My uncle had African American children boarding with him so they could go to the 'Black high school' in town. I would think how awful it was to be away from your family all week just to get an education."

Then in the late 1950s the Little Rock high schools were desegregated amid riots, and Melanie saw the effects of standing up for what you believe in. "So in college, in the summers of 1962-63, I went on the Freedom Rides. I didn't tell my parents ahead of time because they would have feared for my safety.

"I was arrested in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Johnson City, Tennessee. But I like to think it was more a problem for the police than for us because we sang all night in our cells. Maybe that's why the U.S. Justice Department prevailed on them to let us out of jail quickly—we were more trouble than we were worth.

"But," she cautioned, "you have to do these grassroots actions to get people's attention and to create change."

She's still taking action: such as her leadership, as past Board President of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, in filing a lawsuit to stop the Voter ID law from being enacted. "Ignorance is a terrible thing, and many people who aren't affected by the law wonder: 'What's the big deal? If you're poor and don't have a photo ID, why can't you just have your neighbor take you to the Department of Motor Vehicles?' Well, what if you live in a county, like some in Wisconsin, where the DMV is open one Friday a month? And it's 40 miles away? And after someone does take you, the DMV computer system is down and you're told to come back next time? Or what if you have a minimum-wage job and can't get the time off to go?

"Another scenario: What if you have a photo driver's license, you recently married and changed your name, and you registered to vote under your new name? You'll be turned away at the polls because the names don't match on the license and the official voter list.

"Laws like this one are obstacles to voting—helping to suppress the vote of students, older people, low income people, minorities. These laws are just like the poll taxes in the south when I was growing up.

"Educating voters, and getting people out to vote, is always critical. Today one person can spend a billion dollars backing a candidate. But voters' voices can mitigate all that money coming into elections. They can do that by being sure they vote...in every election. Our government needs to represent all the people, not just the people with more available time and money to get the 'proper' ID."

Her mother's "don't be complacent" advice also led Melanie to commit her professional life to nonprofits. For the last 12 years she has been Executive Director of HOPE of Wisconsin, with a goal to ensure that everyone in our state has access to compassionate end-of-life care. She



personally spearheads hospice education efforts as well as state and national advocacy for hospice. One priority for Melanie is a national telehospice bill—ensuring that people in rural areas can receive hospice care 24 hours a day. This allows people to have access the hospice medical staff quickly if health changes occur—rather than waiting 1-2 hours for a nurse to arrive. For months she's been meeting with advocates nationwide to help get the telehospice bill out of a Congressional committee and onto the floor for a vote.

Prior to accepting the position at HOPE she was the director of the Madison YWCA where she began the highly regarded Third Street Program and the annual Racial Justice Award that has developed into a major program area for the YWCA today. Also, as President of the Madison Downtown Rotary Club, Melanie began an annual Ethics Symposium for high school juniors that continues annually as a signature Rotary program.

Melanie may no longer be Board President of the League, but she's still very involved. Making reference to both of her "full-time jobs," Melanie said, "The League has been around for 95 years, and some people say it's not needed, it's dying off. Well I know terminal conditions when I see them. And the League is not terminal. It is going to be around for a long, long time."

"If only there were more Melanie Rameys in the world . . . Melanie's efforts—to make the world a better place through her tireless problem solving and her commitment to creating just and right outcomes—are astonishingly contagious endeavors. She inspires others to get involved and move mountains. Congratulations, Melanie, on receiving this distinctive award!"
– Sharyn Alden

"Melanie Ramey was my boss before she was my friend, and all I knew about Melanie when she first hired me is that I loved her sense of humor and signature dead-pan delivery. We've been working together for years now. And I know that Melanie has made building bridges, advancing reconciliation, and helping others her life's work."
– Moses Altsech
