

The following article about Green Shoots of Democracy appeared in the Chestnut Hill Local

New book by Mt. Airy activist confronts city corruption

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by Len Lear

Is there any hope for the thousands of Democrats in Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy and Germantown who consider themselves progressive but are disgusted by the corrupt, self-serving, greedy actions of the legion of Democratic Party officials over the past several decades who have turned their party into a sleazy cesspool of favors for the in-crowd?

Karen Bojar, 71, a former professor of English and women's studies at Community College of Philadelphia and a 30-year member of the 9th Ward Democratic Committee, attempts to answer this crucial question in her new book, "Green Shoots of Democracy in the Philadelphia Democratic Party," published by She Writes Press in a 288-page paperback that will be released to the public on Aug. 2.

A Mt. Airy resident for her entire adult life, Bojar also has a Ph.D. in English Literature from Temple and a Masters in Education from the University of Pennsylvania. She is also the author of the acclaimed book, "Feminism In Philadelphia: The Glory Years: Philadelphia NOW, 1968-1982," and she was president of the Philadelphia chapter of the National Organization of Women for eight years.

"I had been thinking about writing about ward politics for some time," she told us in a recent interview, "but I didn't start actual work on 'Green Shoots' until April, 2014, when I did my first interview with Rich Chapman, a former leader of the 9th

ward. If I had joined one of the city's more typical wards, I would have probably not have lasted 30 days, let alone 30 years. The culture of the 9th Ward, where committeepeople vote on endorsements and decisions made democratically, was part of the inspiration for 'Green Shoots of Democracy' in the Philadelphia Democratic Party. Unfortunately only five of the city's 69 wards operate like the 9th ward."

Because it is actually democratic and is not run dictatorially, unlike so many other wards, Chestnut Hill's 9th ward is a major part of the book, which includes interviews with past 9th ward leaders, Rich Chapman, Pat Reifsnnyder and John O'Connell and current 9th ward leader Dan Muroff.

According to author Chris Rabb, "'Green Shoots of Democracy' argues that the Democratic Party must be genuinely democratic and transparent on the grassroots level if it is to be a force for change on the national level. Bojar's analysis is applicable to a broad range of political philosophies — a must-read for anyone interested in grassroots politics."

Why is the Democratic machine in Philly so corrupt? According to Bojar, "Certainly the fact that we are a one-party town with roughly 80% of voters registered as Democrats is part of the problem. In 'Green Shoots' I focused on the lack of transparency and democracy in the Democratic Party. The lack of democracy is a factor in party leaders' support for corrupt politicians. If endorsements were made by empowered committeepeople, I think it's much less likely that there would be such tolerance for corruption."

Bojar is refreshingly candid in her opinion that genuine reform of the Philadelphia Democratic Party machine "may not change in my lifetime, but it will change. In many neighborhoods, the party is staffed by ward leaders and committeepeople already in their 60s, 70s and 80s. The current configuration cannot last much longer. The generational change provides an opening for real political change."

In 2018, there will be elections for committeepeople, and Bojar urges anyone who would like to see a more democratic/transparent Democratic Party in Philadelphia to consider running for committeepeople in his/her ward. One of the members of Young Involved Philadelphia, profiled in "Green Shoots," is planning an event to promote Bojar's new book, but the date is not set up yet. She also hopes to have an event at Big Blue Marble Bookstore in Mt. Airy.

What does Bojar think will happen this year in the presidential election? "I will be working hard for Hillary Clinton and expect that she will win. The major problem, as I see it, is that the Democratic base tends to sit out non-presidential-year elections. The Republican base is increasingly comprised of elderly white voters

who faithfully turn up in non-presidential years. I argue in 'Green Shoots' that reinvigorating the committeeperson structure is one way of countering the tendency of many Democrats to vote only in presidential elections."

What was the hardest thing Bojar ever had to do? "The kinds of things that we all have to deal with sooner or later — friends and family members with serious illnesses. I expect the greatest challenges are yet to come."

In her spare time, Bojar enjoys reading, gardening (spending about 3 to 4 hours a day in the garden) and "hanging out with my husband, sharing a bottle of wine ... I am not much of a collector of material objects, but I love my flowers and cram as many as possible into my wild, overplanted garden. It won't win any prizes in garden contests, but I love it dearly."

If Bojar could live anywhere in the world, where would it be? "Right here in Philly. I love my city and can't think of a better place to retire than in Mt. Airy. I've done a lot of traveling, but Philly has always been my home base."

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