

Women share tales of promise and fulfillment

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APPLETON -- Appleton native Elayne Stephenson's life is one for the history books, a real-life "Rosie the Riveter" who climbed three stories of scaffolding to build B-17 bombers during World War II. Stephenson, a guest speaker at Thursday's fifth annual **Women's Fund** luncheon that drew a crowd of 1,000, was one of 6 million women to hang up their aprons and head for factories to keep a massive U.S. war effort on track when men left in droves to fight.

"Our motto was 'Keep 'em flying,' and we all felt so patriotic and proud," said Stephenson, recalling the close-knit camaraderie of these women.

The **Women's Fund** for the Fox Valley Region is a supporting organization of the Community Foundation of the Fox Valley Region. The fund raises money and awards grants to programs that enhance the lives of women and girls. Since 1997, the fund has awarded \$140,000 in grants.

While Stephenson, 84, made history, Hlee Vang, 25, both participated and witnessed it, first in 1987 as an 8-year-old coming to the United States from a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand and again in 2004 when she returned to Thailand as a journalist working for Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers.

She chronicled the journey of the latest wave of refugees to be resettled here as payment for Hmong soldiers' assistance in the Vietnam War. Vang's reporting appeared in "Starting Anew," a special report on the refugees at the Wat Tham Krabok camp in Thailand.

Vang said she resisted parts of her culture and traditions to grow into a modern American woman, but she also paid tribute to her parents' courage and sacrifice in starting a new life here in hopes of "giving their children a chance."

Returning to the camps was "one of the greatest awakenings of my life," Vang stated. "My parents gave up a lot to bring me here."

Also speaking at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel was Dr. Lee Vogel, campus director for the UW Health Fox Valley Family Practice Clinic.

Vogel said she viewed her role as "bridging" the two generations.

"My story is sandwiched between the promise of Hlee's and the fulfillment of Elayne's," Vogel said.

Her message, she said, "Is that women have tremendous possibilities and potential, some of which have been realized. I think the collaboration of women

and their interest in relationships will take the edge off commercialism and competition.

"It's not a world of relationships," yet, she said. "That's what women have to bring."

The speakers were as glad to share their stories and reflections, as the audience was to hear them.

"When you have people who are interested, it is important to share," said Vang. "Hopefully through my story, people can connect to not so much a group's experience, but an individual's experience, a human experience."

Stephenson, who remembered collecting ration stamps from friends and relatives to feed her wedding guests, making do with a "wood orange crate fastened to the window" as a refrigerator and working eight-hour shifts at Boeing for 82.5 cents an hour, hopes her story "gives courage to some young women having a rough time with a couple kids and no husband."

Furthermore, she wants people to know the critical role women played in the war effort.

Clyde Stephenson, her husband of 62 years, said he certainly appreciates it. "Women had a whole new life when the war hit, just like the guys. Everyone's life was turned upside down. I'm real proud of her."

Toward the conclusion of the program, there was a moment of silence for Hurricane Katrina victims. Afterward, Executive Director Jane Dwyre Garton announced that the **Women's Fund** would share 10 percent of funds raised in connection with the annual luncheon with sister Women's Funds in Birmingham, Ala., and Jackson, Miss.

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