

Women's event highlights support for equal rights

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BY NANCY GAGNET / THE BLADE



Keynote speaker Dr. Soon-Young Yoon addresses community members at the Women's History Month event at the Toledo Museum of Art on Monday.

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Women were celebrated for historic tenacity while new commitments were made to bolster equal opportunities for women in business during a special event Monday morning at the Toledo Museum of Art in honor of Women's History Month.

"We want to tell a more accurate story of the identity of our business community today and of the minority and women-owned businesses that contribute so much to the economic strength of our community," said Sandy Spang, deputy director of economic development for the city of Toledo. "It's hard to open a business and it's harder still if you don't see people in the community who have succeeded, if you don't hear their stories."

Ms. Spang also serves as co-chairman of the Northwest Ohio Women's Business Council, which officially debuted at the event. The organization is focused on recognizing female entrepreneurs and later this year the council will formally honor female business owners with the Women's Entrepreneurial Distinction Ovation Award. The newly formed council falls under the umbrella of Women of Toledo, a local non-profit

organization with programming focused on educating, engaging, and empowering women in the community, Ms. Spang said.

Also in attendance at the event were organizers and city officials behind the recently passed legislation guaranteeing equal rights for women. That legislation, which Toledo City Council approved on March 15, ratified a United Nations human rights treaty titled the “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,” which dates back four decades and specifically addresses women’s rights.

Soon-Young Yoon, the United Nations representative of the International Alliance of Women served as keynote speaker at the event and noted that with Toledo’s passage of the legislation, the city is now “a special place on the world women’s map.”

“It says that Toledo understands that you are connected to global affairs and no matter what progress has already been made, a CEDAW city [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] is always ready to do more,” Ms. Yoon said.

Since first introduced, more than 70 counties and states have formally ratified the U.N. resolution, thus committing to implementing measures to end discrimination against women in all forms from social to political, economic and cultural, Ms. Yoon said. In addition, the legislation has spurred ancillary action in other cities such as the implementation of new educational programs on women’s rights and the broadening of coalition efforts to address issues such as housing, violence against women, equal pay, and safety concerns, she said.

“I love this campaign because it has unleashed so much creativity,” she said. “The treaty is our umbrella of protection and it really is critical to surviving changes in administrations, so congratulations to the Toledo youth, this is your legacy.”

The Toledo Lucas County Public Library also supported the event and created a display highlighting women who forged the path for female entrepreneurs and business leaders in this area such as Ella P. Stewart, one of the first black female pharmacists in the United States who was active in civic activities; Grace Estelle Smith, a restaurateur who opened Smith’s Cafeteria on Madison Avenue in 1916; and Mildred Benson, a longtime journalist at both the Toledo Times and The Blade and author of the *Nancy Drew* mystery series.

The event took place in Libbey Court, in the center of the museum, which is named in honor of Florence and Edward Drummond Libbey. Mrs. Libbey is also a significant female figure in Toledo’s early history since as a widow, she gave \$1.5 million for construction of the museum’s Peristyle, during the Great Depression.

“We want to give a history of the women whose shoulders we stand upon now,” said Rhonda Sewell, director of community engagement and belonging at the Toledo Museum of Art. “In my opinion what we are doing now are two historic advancements for women in the city. They will talk about today years from now.”