

EQUAL RIGHTS AMENDMENT

Local forum addresses gender discrimination

By Andrew Mundhenk

Times-News Staff Writer

Supporters, and opponents, of North Carolina ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment gathered at the Henderson County Public Library Tuesday evening for a forum that featured stories from local women who have experienced gender discrimination.

About 20 people attended the question-and-answer event Tuesday evening at the main library branch, hosted the ERA-NC Alliance Henderson County Action Team.

The group is part of a statewide organization urging legislators to pass one of two bills in the House and Senate for North Carolina to become the 38th and final state needed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Tuesday's forum focused on stories from four women of different ages and ethnicities who were given three minutes each to share stories of gender discrimination in their lives.

Lucy Butler grew up in the south as the oldest of six children. Growing up in the '70s when women were expected to become teachers or nurses, Butler desired to go to medical school to become an ear, nose and throat doctor.

Butler was told she would take a valuable spot that a man should have; that she can't have a family and be a physician, too. Butler ultimately listened to those voices.

"I should've stood up," she said. "But back n the '70s, that sweet little southern girl who did what daddy and everybody told her to do listened to those voices rather than her own voice. Now it's my turn to tell my story and to take on the baton and to celebrate the women who came before me who paved these roads for me."

Lori Garcia-McCammon, executive director of nonprofit True Ridge, grew up in Venezuela — a country where boys are usually valued more than girls. She now heads an organization in Henderson County that provides support for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, specifically in the Hispanic community.

She remembers vividly returning to Venezuela and the excitement to work for her father. After spending two years being trained in every part of the business, she was replaced by her brother as soon as he graduated and returned to Venezuela.

"Those are the things, as young women, we grow up and say we're not good enough," she said. "I lived through that until I was maybe 40 years old and I said you know something, I am good enough. I can do whatever I want to do."

Amber Hollinger, who moved to Hendersonville four years ago, was the youngest woman on the panel. But she said she had enough stories to fill a book on **(SCROLL DOWN)** the

times she experienced gender discrimination from unwanted advances or comments. She posed a series of questions on why more women don't report these instances.

"If it's not normal, potentially illegal and it is not our fault, what can we do?" she asked. "What can we do when we need to report or press charges, whether it's against strangers in the bar or professors, supervisors, coworkers, friends, acquaintances, relatives, partners, husbands? How do we know we will be heard and believed?"

Melinda Lowrance, a Hendersonville native, said she had three strikes against her: she is a woman, a woman of color, and grew up poor. She was expected to become a teacher or nurse, but decided instead to major in business administration.

In the workforce, Lowrance noticed she was making less than men, so she decided to start her own business where she was in control. But even then she faced! issues of racial and gender discrimination.

"I was always having to prove myself," she said. "Well, I'm tired of proving myself. I want to be an example not only for my children, my grandchildren, but women in general who want to be entrepreneurs, that you are valuable."

Afterward, there was time for questions about the ERA, with organizer Nancy Glowacki answering most of the attendees' questions.

While most in the room were in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, there was a group of five attendees asking questions and challenging the need for the ERA.

Jane Bilello, representing the Asheville Tea Party, said after the meeting in a conversation with supporters that the ERA takes protections away from women rather than the opposite. One example, she said, would be opening the military draft to women.

Opponents have argued the ERA would overturn laws and practices that benefit women, and take away labor laws that provide accommodations for pregnant women. They also argue laws are already in the books for the gender wage gap (Equal Pay Act of 1963) and women's rights (the 14th Amendment).

But ERA ratification has received support from local governments. Resolutions in support have been passed by all elected officials in Flat Rock, Fletcher, Hendersonville, Laurel Park and Mills River. It has yet to be put on an agenda for the Henderson County Board of Commissioners, however.

Glowacki encouraged those in attendance to contact state legislators to call for the bills to be heard in committee. If the bills are not heard during this session, the group will have to start over again in January for the short session. She noted Rep. Chuck McGrady has agreed to support the ERA.

"We will not stop," she said. "We will go through the summer if we have to and we'll start again in January if we have to."