

Comments by Nancy J. Newman– 10/20/2023 IANGEL Gala

Good evening! Thank you *Mark, Jennie, and Bernie!* And thank you all for being here to celebrate IANGEL's milestone 10th Anniversary.

As pretty much all of you know, I am Nancy Newman, the founder and president of the International Action Network for Gender Equity & Law, affectionately known by its acronym, IANGEL. When we started planning this event, our first task was to find a theme, to try to capture what people were feeling in these crazy times. We knew our gala must be inspiring, so we focused on hope. But as Rebecca Solnit wisely observed: "*Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky.*" Since we are fighting age-old patriarchal traditions embedded in cultures and institutions across the world, along with **hope**, we need **power**. So I want to talk about *Powering Hope*, and why it matters.

To me, the first key to finding power to make positive change is **dare to try**. I have a lot of experience with this, going back many years. 55 years to be precise.

The year was 1968. I was in 2nd grade. It was an election year, and Sydney Elementary School was mirroring the times, as the walls of classrooms and hallways were bedecked with campaign advertising: "Vote for Tim, Class President" or "Vote for Lisa – she'll be great!" At the time, I did not know we had a Student Council. Truthfully, I did not know what a Student Council was. But it looked fun, so I enquired at the school office – How can I join? They said: "You can't. Student body elections are only for the 4th, 5th, and 6th graders." *How unfair* I thought. If someone is representing the students, and I am a student, why am I excluded?

Later that day, I saw a pamphlet at my house. It read: "Lower the Voting Age to 18." It explained that Americans were being drafted at age 18 to fight in Viet Nam. If they were old enough to be forced to war, they should be old enough to vote for those deciding to send them there. It was a compelling message. And I got an idea.

I tore a piece of paper from a notebook, and printed a headline: **Lower the Voting Age to Eight**. Then I wrote that the undersigned had observed that student council elections were underway at Sydney School, but half the student body was excluded by an arbitrary age limitation. This was unfair, and it should change. Sign here if you agree.

I took my petition to school the next day and during recess, asked my classmates to sign. "Hey, do you want to vote?" "Do you want to have some *power*?" And pretty much everyone I asked said yes! I filled my petition in one day. I went back to the office, and presented it to the principal.

Was he amused? Yes. Was he persuaded? Also yes. And right then, the rule changed. He opened voting to any student who wanted to vote. Then the candidates started talking to the younger students as if they mattered, and I thought – *this* is pretty cool. So I learned back then that simply if **you dare to try**, you can create power where none existed before.

And really, that is what IANGEL does. For 10 years, we have been *daring to try*. Ten years ago, I did not know how we would build a global network to advance gender equality locally, nationally, and globally. I just knew we had to try - because I felt the other side was gaining ground, and goddammit I have two daughters, whom I love to the moon and back. Their future matters more to me than anything in this world.

In 10 years, we have found our footing, powering hope through **education, advocacy, and engagement** of pro bono resources on critical issues of reproductive freedom; empowerment; and peace. We remain outraged at the *Dobbs* decision last year, reversing 50 years of constitutional protection for **basic reproductive freedom**. But we channeled anger into action, with a project to teach local teenagers about their reproductive rights. We'll hear more on this from IANGEL Vice President Rebecca Hooley, and the wonderful **Ilyse Hogue**, later this evening.

Internationally, we are focused on the Taliban's outrageous subjugation of women and girls in Afghanistan, virtually erasing women from public life, and systematically depriving them of basic human rights. IANGEL is engaged in new research and analysis to develop a more effective foreign policy to address the crisis. We have also connected with the Afghan Independent Bar Association in Exile, and have started Zoom calls with women lawyers inside Afghanistan, to build a connection for empowerment. And we support underground education for women and girls inside Afghanistan, led by women of unflagging determination and courage. **You will hear their voices** this evening, reminding us that they are fighting, and grateful for our support.

Right now, Afghan women are carrying the hopes and dreams of a generation on their backs. Like our honoree this evening, **Zala Ahmad**, they are resourceful, strong, and inspiring. They power hope for all of us, reminding us that we each have a role to play, to create the future we wish to see. As historian Howard Zinn observed, *"To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness."*

So yes we grieve for the injustice inflicted on the women and girls around the world, by dark forces of oppression and greed. But our love is stronger than their greed. And working together, we can change the course of history. When we dare to try, **we are powering hope**.