Women’s Leadership and Development

KUFM Commentary: April 4, 2012
By Deena Mansour, Mansfield Center Project Manager

At a time when events in women’s self-determination and security dominate headlines, both local and national, The University of Montana’s Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center will mark its 27th annual conference by bringing high-level experts to the University to look at issues affecting women. The conference, “Holding Up Half the Sky: Women’s Leadership and Development,” will be held on Thursday, April 26, and is free and open to the public. To explain why we’ve chosen this theme for our conference, and why it’s of interest to KUFM listeners, I’d like to share the history of the Mike Mansfield and what our Center is doing on issues of women’s empowerment.

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center was established at The University of Montana in 1983 with an endowment from the U.S. Congress to honor Senator Mansfield’s long and distinguished service and his bipartisan methods and express the universal respect in which the nation held him and his life partner, Maureen Hayes Mansfield.

Throughout his life, Senator Mansfield credited his wife Maureen with helping him achieve all he was to attain, and refused any honor that did not include recognition of Maureen’s role. While working in the copper mines of Butte, Mansfield met Maureen, a Butte high school teacher and daughter of one of the city’s prominent families. They were soon married, and with her encouragement, Mansfield quit work as a miner, passed his high school equivalency exam, and completed his education here in Missoula, earning advanced degrees in history and political science. Encouraged by Maureen to run for political office, Mansfield was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1942, succeeding Jeannette Rankin, who chose not to run for reelection. He eventually became not only the longest serving Senate Majority
Leader in our nation’s history, but also the longest serving ambassador, with an assignment to Japan of nearly 12 years. Mansfield was quoted as saying, “Since we first met in 1928, my wife has been the greatest influence in my life, bar none...” Clearly, Mike Mansfield would not have reached his place in history without a strong woman providing guidance and support.

In keeping with Center priorities on both ethics and Asia, we recently earned a grant by the U.S. Department of State to implement a Women’s Empowerment Project for the countries of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. We currently have 10 remarkable women from Southeast Asia visiting Montana, where they will conduct fellowships in fields such as the environment, economic development, health, and violence against women. The goal for the project is to work with emerging leaders to engage in collaborative action to address women’s concerns that have global repercussions.

While Mao Zedung is credited with coining the phrase “women hold up half the sky” in 1952, Americans are increasingly familiar with the phrase through the 2009 book, Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide. In the book, journalists Nick Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn make a case for investing in the health and autonomy of women. They write that it is impossible for countries to climb out of poverty without empowering women.

To capitalize on the wealth of expertise we have in the southeast Asia delegation, and to address issues of importance here on campus and throughout the country, the Mansfield Center has chosen the theme of “Holding Up Half the Sky: Women’s Leadership and Development,” for its 27th annual conference. The conference is shaped by the idea that local women are the most effective agents for change. We have recruited women from around the world to provide their experience in real solutions that address issues in violence against women, law, development and leadership. These
diverse perspectives will come from their hands-on work with Native American tribes, in refugee camps, and on Capitol Hill.

Among the speakers are Kim Gandy, former president of NOW and the Vice President of the Feminist Majority; Aisha Rahman, Executive Director of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights; Dr. Roma Bhattacharjea, Senior Gender Advisor for Crisis Prevention and Recovery at the United Nations; and Matthew Fletcher, Director of the Indigenous Law & Policy Center at Michigan State University. We'll also showcase local experts, including Dr. Luana Ross, president of Salish Kootenai College, Representative Diane Sands of the Montana House of Representatives, and Julie Sirrs, an attorney with Boone Karlberg who has extensive experience in Afghanistan. And we’ll include representatives of the southeast Asian delegation, including Ngo Hang, a community development specialist in Vietnam and Sutada M., an advisor to the prime minister of Thailand.

The conference will be held on Thursday, April 26, from 8:30-5:00 pm in the Dell Brown Room of UM’s Turner Hall. It is free and open to the public. Because of limited seating, we recommend that you reserve your place by calling 243-2988 or through our website, at www.umt.edu/mansfield. We hope you can join us for what promises to be a thought-provoking event.

On behalf of the Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour. Thank you for listening.