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A voice of moderation

By: Pat Summers , Special Writer



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

Linda Mather brings some special skills to the public forum

There are certain things to be expected at a candidates' forum for an upcoming board of education election.

A room full of people with questions, issues, gripes and grievances comes to mind, for instance. Likewise, a cacophony of questions — How is the superintendent of schools regarded? Are kids getting into college? Winning in athletics? — is the expected accompaniment.

A meeting that runs as smoothly as a well-oiled machine, where everyone has the chance to voice an (appropriately brief) opinion, is anything but typical. Unless, of course, it happens to be an event moderated by Linda Mather, Ed.D.

Ms. Mather, a veteran moderator for the League of Women Voters, has moderated candidates' forums for school boards and local government races for 20 years. A LWV member for much longer than that, she had initially joined "to meet other intelligent women." Her first meeting was so informative, she made a commitment that has lasted until now.

That was in Glassboro in Gloucester County, where she taught at Glassboro State College (now Rowan University). When she and her husband, Donald, moved to Princeton in the '80s, she remained an active member. In fact, from 1987 to 1991, she was the first person to serve two consecutive terms as president of the League of Women Voters of the Princeton Area.

"The league believes in an active and informed citizenry, and this is just another format, a way for people to get more information about their candidates," she says of the organization-sponsored candidates' nights and topic-specific meetings. Just last night she moderated a forum on U.S.

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immigration policy for the Lawrence league.

Asked why she takes on about 10 sessions a year, each demanding about 10 hours, all told, she replies, "I believe in it. A democracy requires us to be active and informed. This is my contribution, and as with any volunteer work, I get so much out of it. I learn a lot about local communities and the election process, and I challenge myself when I'm working by asking what I would say to that ... On a personal level, it hones my facilitation skills, which are important to me."

Ms. Mather is certified by the International Association of Facilitators, and she is a certification assessor, process manager and the treasurer of the organization.

When a two-hour session packed with people and issues runs like clockwork, it's never an accident. A smooth sequence of intros-questions-closing takes planning that typically begins weeks before the event.

It starts with Ms. Mather's checklist that has evolved with her years of experience. "When I don't use it, I'm always sorry," she says. "Coordinators may not know how much they know that you don't know."

Reviewing the list with the event coordinator — typically a PTO rep or LWV member — she tries to learn ahead of time about controversial issues, and people, that might be involved in the session. Similarly, she takes care to assure that logistics — space, podium, microphones, timekeeping, name cards, water, publicity — are in order.

She checks on correct name pronunciation and use of titles, which she prefers. "This is a public meeting — it's not a barbecue." How participants will be seated is another decision, with alphabetical order preferred, but sometimes it's by ballot order or political party.

She encourages an informal reception after the forum. Follow-up questions over cookies in a casual setting provide another way to assess candidates.

"Very early in the session, I have to establish a level of trust with the audience and the candidates," Ms. Mather explains.

"I'm there to keep this two hours safe for everybody — the candidates, to express their views fairly, with equal time, and also safe for the audience. I think I do that more by demeanor than anything. I've got to keep an eye on everything. A fair amount is intuiting," she says. "I try to read the reactions of candidates and listeners in deciding whether to continue down a certain road."

She can sense when to ask candidates if they want one more go-round on a complex question.

Ms. Mather's tone-setting includes asking the audience to refrain from "applause and other outcries." An audience "stacked with partisan people" disappoints her, although her approach tends to neutralize their effect.

Increasingly, she calls for written questions from the audience. This keeps people from pontificating and making mini-speeches: "That's not the point. It's about the candidates." As moderator, she can scan questions submitted and assure both a range of subjects and their appropriateness — for instance, this isn't the venue for personnel questions. She may combine or rephrase questions, and sometimes falls back on comic relief: "Now here's a question easily answered in one minute."

There have been a few iffy times, when Ms. Mather wasn't sure of the outcome. Once an audience insisted on a line of questions about an imminent factory closing, and she had to make the call: Say "no, not appropriate" and risk anarchy, or go ahead and try it. Her decision to explore the topic defused the situation and people soon moved on to other topics.

At another potentially inflammatory meeting, the subject was school vouchers and people were heated up about it. Luckily, though, a half-dozen nuns in habit — also stakeholders in this issue — were scattered throughout the audience. "Everyone was on good behavior," Ms. Mather remembers.

While she can recall only a few sessions that prompted her to check her car tires afterward, she's too modest to say outright that meetings don't get out of order on her watch.

Although Ms. Mather's LWV gigs often fall within a 20-mile radius of her home, they have taken her to Jersey City and Elizabeth, as well as Camden, Ocean and Monmouth counties. She says that more travel lets her learn more about New Jersey.

She is also treasurer of Princeton Community Housing, with 11 years of board service, and secretary of the Community Services Corporation of New Jersey, with a two-year board affiliation. Clearly, she's generous with her volunteer time and certainly entitled to claim that there's "a lot on her plate," although she's not the type to do so.

All of the above is what Linda Mather does in her "free time." Otherwise, she's president of Forums Institute for Public Policy, a nonpartisan organization that for nearly 10 years has facilitated discussions and exchange of ideas among public policy decision makers, providing the resources for them to take action in their own fields.

Her career has also included university teaching and administration, extensive consulting and diverse facilitation experience. Besides holding faculty status at Thomas Edison State College, her ongoing projects include working with community advisory panels for chemical companies. Ms. Mather earned her doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania.

During this election season, she'll moderate candidate forums for the East Windsor Regional, Hopewell Valley and Montgomery Township school districts, and Trenton's municipal council. And of course she has high hopes:

"It seems to me that asking any citizen to give one evening to meeting the candidates, and then to vote, is not a lot to ask, particularly when you look at what's going on around the world. How can we talk about how important democracy is when we have such low voter turnout?"

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