

Steinem's message resonates for all ages

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – As Gloria Steinem, a diminutive figure clad in black and surprisingly glamorous for a woman of 82, glided onstage at UNR'S Nightingale Hall, the packed house erupted with noise, clapping loudly as they all rose as one body and awarded her a Nevada-style welcome fit for a queen.

To many, Steinem is a queen. Queen of women's rights, including reproductive freedom, domestic violence, sexual violence and injustice toward people of color, toward members of the LGBTQ community and equal pay for women. Steinem, it would seem, is the champion of the underdog, not only in the United States, but globally.

"I'm an entrepreneur of social change," she said. "I talk. I write. I tell stories. I want to do justice to the women I meet."

On this night, her audience consisted of not only women who were on board Steinem's feminist train in the late '60s and '70s, but also young people, in between people and a surprising number of men. Clearly, Steinem has remained a visible and vibrant presence through the years and has kept her audience intact while inducting large numbers of new recruits to her causes.

There are those who remember quite clearly a younger Gloria Steinem and stood in awe of what she was able to accomplish in the name of women's equality. But of course, there are some from the turbulent era of the Equal Rights Amendment, and even now, who consider her a blowhard.

She came to Reno at the invitation of several organizations

including the Holland Project and Sundance Bookstore. Her speaker's fee was donated to the Holland Project, an all-ages arts and music initiative by and for young people.

What started as a typical lecture-type talk morphed into what Steinem called a chat around a campfire with numerous audience members pitching their causes while extolling the positive effect Steinem has had on them and their mothers.

"We need to say what concerns us," she said. "Now women deeply understand the basic reason for women's secondary position. Men have always controlled women's reproductive bodies."

She added that it is not possible to be a feminist without being an anti-racist. "Everything is connected," she said.



Gloria Steinem is continuing to spread her feminist message. Photo/Ms. Foundation for Women/file

Steinem believes we are going through a time of great danger. "There's a huge identity crises going on," she said, adding that in a short time there will no longer be a majority of white people in the U.S. This is a good thing, she said.

"We'll become connected to the rest of the world; we are on the cusp of great change. Now we must be careful to take care of each other. A woman is in most danger when she's about to be free and now women are in danger because we are about to be freed."

Heavy words to be sure, but Steinem has spent years honing her message and has pretty much stuck to it throughout the decades. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Smith College in 1956, and over the years became a writer, lecturer, political activist and feminist organizer. In 1972, she founded Ms. Magazine and continues to be a consulting editor for the publication.

Her activities have earned her numerous awards and there have been various documentaries produced about her.

In 2000, at the age of 66, she married David Bale, father of actor Christian Bale. Unfortunately, Bale died after only three years of marriage to Steinem, at the age of 62.

A continuing thread in her talk was connections and their power. "Bias is based on sex and race and is connected. The bias against transsexuals and gays is connected. We are linked not ranked. Each of us is a combination of heredity and environment. There is something unique in each of us, but we all share our humanity. It's simple," she said laughing, launching into more thoughts on her favorite subject.

"Women have power, but we must remember to listen instead of talk. Simple daily things will get us where we want to go. You can't destroy a village to save it; the ends don't justify the means."

As the house light went up, many eager people couldn't wait to have a chance to voice their opinions. Audience members talked freely about politics, sex, gay and lesbian issues, and equality in the workplace.

Sensing that millennials made up a good part of the audience, Steinem voiced her enthusiasm for all young men and women. "I just had to wait for some of my friends to be born," she says of her millennial friends.

She continued the age topic saying it's OK to be older. "Feelings about age are tied to reproduction. We women are more valued for our wombs than for our brains, but once the reproductive roll is finished, you are free and can become a feisty girl again."

Steinem believes the old and the young are connected by their opinions—they are natural allies. "The old and the young understand each other because they are closest to the unknown."

Dropping a few of her tried and true gems, Steinem said that women aren't trying to be better than men, they're just trying to be equal. "Cooperation beats domination every time."

On feminism, she said: "There is no definition, but there is a full circle of characteristics."

She also aired her assessment of the workplace: "Equal pay starts with discussing how much each of us makes in the office. All productive work must be recognized [paid for], from taking care of the elderly to taking care of kids and aids patients," she said, commenting that simply recognizing the hours spent on these tasks and compensating for them monetarily would be a big boost to the economy.

As everyone rolled out of the auditorium there was lots of chatter about Steinem and what her messages are.

Janice Hoke, a Reno resident, enthusiastically shared her take on the evening's message with *Lake Tahoe News*. "Gloria was intellectual, genuine and inspiring. Her message is to recognize the connections between people rather than the barriers, do all that you can but realize that you won't

succeed every time. She said feminists must naturally be anti-racism as well since it's the same patriarchal systems that are against both groups. And she believes the small things we do every day are the most important actions that will make progress in the world."

Carol Raphel, another Renoite, said, "Her message transcends gender and race. We are humans first."