

AGA History



*Celebrating
50 Years
1950-2000*

AGA's Four Female Past National Presidents Reminisce About Turbulent Times and the Great Honor of Leading the Association

By: Marie Sullivan Force

It was an auspicious gathering. One day after AGA began its 50th Anniversary celebration, four Past National Presidents came together to discuss their AGA experiences—as members, as leaders and as the only four women to hold the Association's highest elected office. Their stories varied, but one theme emerged. Each was in the right place at the right time to affect real change and to help lay the foundation for today's AGA.

Eleanor M. Clark, CGFM, June Gibbs Brown, CGFM, Virginia B. Robinson, CGFM, and Virginia S. Brizendine, CGFM, held the top post during some difficult years and led the Association with skill and determination. To be in the presence of these four women is to know how close AGA came to being a very different organization. State and local members were threatening to secede, finances were in disorder, the education program was floundering and there was no clear direction of where the Association was headed or even who it was supposed to serve. Because each of these women had known significant challenges in their professional careers, they ended up being uniquely qualified to lead the Association through difficult times.

The First Woman

Ellie Clark was first, in 1981-1982, and no one was more surprised than she was. When she graduated from The George Washington University, she couldn't get an interview with a national public accounting firm because she was a woman. The private sector's loss was government's gain. All of the women agree that government was always ahead of the private sector in open-

ing doors to women and minorities.

As Clark's government career progressed, she was encouraged by a colleague to join AGA to enhance her professional development. While she found that the organization welcomed all comers, it never occurred to her to seek out a national leadership position—until she was asked to consider a run for National President.

"I was overwhelmed at such a notion," Clark said, describing her reaction to being asked. Becoming President, it turned out, was not automatic, even with the endorsement of the Nominating Committee. For the first time that anyone could remember, an opposition candidate came forward at the last minute and managed to win one chapter away from Clark. But she won all the others and began two years as President-Elect and President, traveling to more than 60 chapters. At no point during her term, did Clark feel that she was treated differently because she was a woman—the first woman to lead the Association.

"It didn't seem to ever again be an issue," said Clark, who retired from the federal government as the chief financial officer of the Federal Housing Administration and is now working as an international financial management consultant. "You just have to get over the hump."

While she is known for being the first female National President, she is especially proud of several significant accomplishments during her year.

Recognizing the serious deficiencies in AGA's education program, Clark led a major effort to redefine AGA's education goals, to restructure program substance and to enhance delivery mechanisms to



Ellie Clark



June Gibbs Brown

Editor's Note: As part of AGA's 50th Anniversary celebration, this new department will be featured in upcoming issues, featuring leaders, issues and events that have shaped the Association's past and charted its course for the future. We hope you enjoy this look back.

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Virginia Robinson



Virginia Brizendine

achieve the “biggest bang for the buck.” A *Common Body of Knowledge for Government Financial Managers and Auditors (CBOK)*, issued during Clark’s term, became the basis for shaping major modifications to the education program. Most noteworthy, was the restructuring of the annual Professional Development Conference to provide in-depth training in key technical financial management subject areas such as accounting, auditing, budgeting and technology, and to emphasize the importance of continuing professional education to the government financial management profession.

State and Local Champion

“Ellie did such an excellent job that it was never a question again that a woman could provide the leadership that the membership needed,” said June Gibbs Brown, who was second.

Brown encountered some discrimination herself on her journey to the National Presidency, during the 1985-1986 program year. As the number one graduate in a class of 1,800 students, she was also unable to get an interview with a public accounting firm because of her gender. Like Clark, she found government to be a much more welcoming environment and by the time she was elected President, she had served as inspector general at two federal agencies. Today, she is the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

During her tenure, Brown championed the cause of state and local government members, who believed they were not getting what they needed from the Washington, D.C.-based AGA. Members were threatening to quit and join the Government Finance Officers Association. One of the big issues during Brown’s presidency was overcoming the mind-set that no one outside of the Washington, D.C. area could be National President.

She is proud of the resolution that passed during her year providing that one out of every three years, the AGA National President would be from out-

side of Washington, D.C. This opened the door for state and local leadership and allowed federal members working outside of Washington to take on leadership positions.

“It changed the course of AGA,” Brown said. Indeed, today more than half of AGA’s members work in state and local governments.

Expanding State and Local Involvement

Virginia Robinson had never given much thought to being National President until she witnessed the success of Brown’s term. “I felt as though the Association had saved a whole group of problems for the person most qualified to handle them, and that person was June,” Robinson said.

Robinson was preceded by Meredith Williams, CGFM, the first President from the state and local community. While the Association was grappling with widespread change, its financial health had disintegrated significantly. Robinson grappled with this enormous challenge and with the help of a lot of dedicated colleagues completed her term with the Association’s finances in good condition. To make the most of her appointment to the National Executive Committee at a time when there was still considerable concern about real inclusion of state and local leadership in the organization, she appointed a state and local member to the committee.

As National President in 1989-1990, she visited 57 chapters. “That year was one of the best experiences of my career,” said Robinson, who retired from federal service as the executive director of the Joint Financial Management Improvement Program and works today as a consultant.

The Used Band Director

Virginia Brizendine came to the accounting profession after working for years as a high school band director. As an accounting school graduate at age 30, she found discrimination not because she was a woman, but because she was

considered old. "I found there was no great need out there for used band directors or older entry-level accountants," she said with a smile.

As she began her career working for the State of Missouri, she found her AGA membership to be instrumental in making valuable contacts with her peers around the country and as a source for the continuing professional education she needed to stay current.

"I had access, and if I wanted a job, I could get one," she said. Brizendine noted that Brown was National President at the third Professional Development Conference she attended and recalls being so impressed to see a woman leading the organization.

Her support of Charles L. Harrison, CGFM, as National President from Tennessee, paid off later with his support of her as the first female state and local National President in 1995-1996. Brizendine's legacy as President was pushing the Association to be more than anyone had ever thought possible. As the grandfathering period for the Certified Government Financial Manager (CGFM) Program was drawing to a close, Brizendine called for 10,000 CGFMs, 3,000 more than the goal the Professional Certification Board had set.

"I didn't think we were dreaming high enough with CGFM,"

she said. She was right—the final total was more than 13,000 when her term and the grandfathering period ended on June 30, 1996. She also advocated an aggressive membership campaign and has championed AGA's education program for years. Today she is the chief financial officer for the Missouri Public School Retirement System/Non-Teacher School Employee Retirement System.

"Until you have been National President, you don't realize how much time and energy other Presidents have given to this organization," she said, adding that when it was over, she sat on her deck, put her feet up and said, "ah, I've got my life back!"

Looking Forward

While the four women agree that being a Past President means exactly that, they are still aware of the challenges facing AGA. Keeping up with the changing profession, determining priorities and maintaining education and networking opportunities are vital concerns. However, they agreed that maintaining the CGFM Program is critical to the Association's future.

"There's no turning back," Clark said, "we are in this for good." Spoken like a true pioneer.