

## **Yugoslav women passionate about politics**

By Naoibh O'Connor- Staff writer

Before Yugoslavia held its first democratic elections in October of 2000, members of an all-female organization called Voice of Difference knocked on 45,000 doors to convince women to vote. Some were even arrested and thrown in jail overnight for putting up posters promoting that message. But the results were astounding: 70 per cent of those who marked a ballot were women.

"It certainly was the women's vote that really moved that country," said Joanne Silver, one of two representatives of the Vancouver-based Canadian Women Voters Congress who returned from a visit to Belgrade and the southern city of Nis.

Silver, a 50-year-old consultant, is chair of Vancouver's Women's Campaign School, which is sponsored by the congress and Simon Fraser University. Its annual four- to five-day, non-partisan course teaches women the skills necessary to run for office or work as campaign managers. Silver travelled overseas with the congress president, Charlene Brisson, a 41-year-old marketing manager for the Vancouver Sun, as part of an educational exchange to Yugoslavia Nov. 11 to 17.

"What left me most impressed is the passion these women have, a collective passion for overcoming adversity and getting women involved in the political process," said Brisson.

It's a passion that's not quite as evident in Canada, where across the country, women hold only an average of 20 per cent of political positions. In terms of the number of women holding federal office, Canada ranks 28th among 179 countries. "And we've been at this game for a long time," Brisson said. "The difference is we're not fighting for our basic civil rights so that passion is not there, there's no common goal. They've got the fire burning."

During the trip, the pair met with members of Voice of Difference, many of whom were under 30 and well-educated, communicating largely through translators.

The drive from Belgrade to Nis, Silver recalled, could have been a drive to Abbotsford in terms of its geography, except for the bombed-out buildings. A professor who attended one meeting recounted how difficult it had been to adjust to the sudden drop in salary that accompanied years of strife in her country-she went from earning roughly \$3,000 to \$200 a month, practically overnight. Even now, many of the women work two full-time jobs to make ends meet.

Despite the challenges they face daily, the women were determined to take control of their futures through political involvement, Brisson said.

In Canada, the obstacles women face may not be as dramatic, but running for office still isn't that appealing, especially in light of the adversarial nature of the process and the challenge of raising money.

"Men raise money easier than women. A man can play a round of golf and come out with a lot of money. Women have to convince people they're worthy of backing," Silver said.

The Women's Campaign School, scheduled for April 25 to 28, is designed to make it easier for women to get involved. Since it's taught by women who hold or have held office, it offers valuable and practical insights. Honourary co-chairs of the school are Mary Collins, ex-minister of defense under Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative government, and Penny Priddy who served at the helm of various provincial ministries, including health, education and children and families, under Mike Harcourt and Glen Clark's New Democratic Party governments.

The school, modeled after a similar program at Yale University, takes 50 students each year and is always full.

Brisson and Silver hope to raise money to bring some representatives from Voice of Difference to speak during the course.

A municipal workshop is also being planned for next fall in time for the civic election.

Cost of the Women's Campaign School is \$430 plus GST. To register, call SFU at 604-291-5069 or the congress at 604-878-8228, or check out the web site at [www.sfu.ca/cstudies/womenscampaignschool](http://www.sfu.ca/cstudies/womenscampaignschool)