

Each August, we have the opportunity to mark the greatest expansion of democratic rights in our nation's history – the day American women were afforded the right to vote. August 26, 1920, observed as Women's Equality Day, marks was a milestone in human progress – and one that marked neither beginning nor end in a struggle that is far older than United States itself.

For it was at that moment that the aspirations of Margaret Brent – a St. Mary's businesswoman who appeared before the Maryland General Assembly in 1648 and became the first woman in the new world to demand a vote – were, at long last, realized.

It was at that moment that the dreams of trailblazers like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton – which were finally brought to fruition by suffragists like Alice Paul and Lucie Burns – gave way to the activism of advocates like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. It was at that moment that centuries of frustration finally gave way to hopes for a brighter future rife with opportunity.

And it was at that moment that a struggle for equality evolved into a struggle for equity – progress that ultimately allowed us to celebrate yet another landmark moment in women's history this January when the House of Representatives elected the first ever woman Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

This year, in observance of Women's Equality Day, **I was proud to host more than 120** women business owners and community leaders from Southern Maryland **for the Fifth Annual Women's Equality Day Networking Fair and Luncheon.**

In addition to celebrating the passage of the 19th

Amendment, the event serves to recognize the valuable role women play in our region as well as women's continuing efforts toward full equality.

I had the honor of welcoming our special guest speaker, Lorraine Miller, the first African American woman to serve as the Clerk of the House of Representatives. As the House's chief legislative official, Lorraine's duties are broad ranging, including supervising roll call votes, directing floor operations and maintaining official records. Her professional successes as well as that of Speaker Pelosi and other women are testaments to the significant progress we have made in leveling the playing field for women in the workplace.

In Maryland, women are making incredible strides towards full equality in their professions. Just this week, it was announced that University of Maryland Distinguished Professor Rita R. Colwell will be one of seven recipients of the 2006 National Medal of Science, the nation's highest honor for science.

In Maryland's business sector, there are an estimated 210,751, privately-held, majority women-owned firms. These firms account for 41.2 percent of all privately held firms in the State; generate more than \$32 billion a year in sales; and employ an estimated 223,760 workers. Between 1997 and 2006, the number of privately-held, majority women-owned firms increased by 58.1 percent.

In order to ensure we remain on this path of progress, I am proud to join Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, Chairwoman of the House Small Business Committee, and other Democrats as we fight to create the fiscal environment that allows small and women owned

businesses to thrive. We are working to ensure that small businesses have access to the resources and technical assistance they need, including: providing targeted tax relief, supporting fair trade agreements that open markets for small businesses, and helping make employee health coverage more affordable.

I am also a firm believer in equal pay for women and have supported legislation in Congress to that end. Over the last four decades, we have made strides in closing the wage gap between women and men. But there is still more work to be done. Working women now earn about 77 cents for every dollar earned by men.

It takes the average woman 16 months to earn what men earn in one calendar year. Equal pay is not only a women's issue, it's a family issue. Women are often providing a significant share of their family's income, and in many cases they are the sole wage-earner.

If we expect women to juggle their families, their careers, and all of the other responsibilities that life throws their way- then we, as a nation, have a responsibility to ensure that they are playing on a level field. That's what recognizing Women's Equality Day is all about; ensuring that those who now guard the legacy of Ms. Anthony, Ms. Stanton, Ms. Brent, Ms. Pelosi, and Ms. Miller – can do so in a society that is just, that is civil, and that is, above all, fair.

My experiences as a son, a husband, and a father helped me to better appreciate

the enormous contributions women have made to our society, and also the unique challenges women face in the workplace. We have a lot to be proud of with regard to women's equality – but just as those who came before, we have a responsibility to continue this outstanding trajectory of progress.