

**Portraits of perseverance;
Women's Union anniversary exhibition honors 125 females who make a difference**

BY: Pamela H. Sacks

- Sandra Kurtinitis was pleased and more than a little surprised when the Women's Educational & Industrial Union named her one of the leading women in Massachusetts.

Ms. Kurtinitis, who is president of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, pointed out she had, after all, spent much of her career in the Washington, D.C., area.

Yet since taking the helm at Quinsigamond in 1995, she has bolstered the school's academic offerings -- from liberal arts to vocational training programs -- and has forged partnerships with government, business and educational institutions in the area. Some of her students have gone on to Smith College and WPI on full scholarships. Others have carved out careers as dental hygienists and phlebotomists.

"We had no technology a few years ago," said Ms. Kurtinitis, who is the first woman to head Quinsigamond. "Now, we're one of the best-equipped institutions in Central Massachusetts."

As a highly accomplished Massachusetts woman, Ms. Kurtinitis, 58, is in good company. When the union put out the word it was seeking nominations of influential women to be included in a photo exhibition, Ms. Kurtinitis' name was among hundreds to pour in from across the state.

"We had a committee that spent many days and hours going over the different nominations," said Barbara V. Trevisan, the union's director of marketing and communications. The panel sought diversity

in age, cultural background, geographic location and type of work.

The exhibition, "Every Woman's Voice: 125 Years of Women's Leadership," features the portraits of 125 women, each celebrating a year since the union's founding in 1877, as well as a selection of historical photographs. The portraits are a joint effort of the nonprofit organization and photographer Robert Bachrach of the famous Boston studio that bears his family name. Mr. Bachrach donated his services.

"I was surprised and flattered that my work is recognized as good work," Ms. Kurtinitis said recently. "You work hard, you think no one notices. It feels good when someone does." The exhibition, which opened at the Statehouse in June, was to go up at the main branch of the Worcester Public Library yesterday, and will be on display through Nov. 30. It will travel throughout Massachusetts through the end of March.

Along with the portrait of Ms. Kurtinitis, five other women from the Worcester area are featured: Zoila Feldman, executive director of Great Brook Valley Health Center; Gloria Hall, director of the Willis Center Cultural Institute; Honee Hess, director of education at Worcester Art Museum; Annette Rafferty, founder of Abby's House Inc.; and Cathy Recht, vice president for community relations at UMass Memorial Health Care.

"There are some women everyone would know, like Swift and O'Brien," said Ms. Trevisan, referring to Gov. Jane M. Swift and state Treasurer and Democratic gubernatorial candidate Shannon P. O'Brien. "And then there are women who are unsung heroes, who do great work in

their own communities but have not been widely recognized. This is by no means all inclusive; we hope it is representative."

All of the women -- among them judges, dancers, activists, public servants, corporate executives, athletes and educators -- are impressive, Ms. Trevisan said. But one stands out in her mind: Yoko Kato of Northampton.

Ms. Kato suffered the most devastating of losses in January 1993 -- the murders of her 23-year-old daughter, Sherry, and 18-month-old grandson, Cedric, at the hands of the baby's father. Rather than destroy her, the tragedy stirred Ms. Kato, a fashion designer, to fight domestic violence, both here and in her native Japan.

"To have really tried to do something positive from something so tragic takes a special person," Ms. Trevisan said.

The first week after Sherry and Cedric were killed, Ms. Kato said, she was so distraught she could not leave home. Numb with grief, she watched the news coverage of the killings on television.

Their deaths had been exceptionally brutal. Sherry was holding Cedric when her former boyfriend, Sean Seabrook, burst into her apartment and slashed the baby's face. She dashed from the kitchen to the bedroom, where Mr. Seabrook stabbed her 57 times as she twisted left to right trying to protect her child.

"I saw on TV a group of people marching with a picture of Sherry," Ms. Kato remembered. "I didn't know anybody in Boston. They were marching for me. When I saw someone was helping me out and doing this for Sherry and Cedric, I couldn't stay home."

The following week she joined a march against domestic violence in Northampton.

Mr. Seabrook was convicted of first-degree murder and is serving two life sentences without possibility of parole.

Over the past decade, Ms. Kato has helped break down the wall of silence

surrounding domestic violence in Japan through relentless appeals to the news media, government officials, lawyers and education and social service professionals. Japan passed its first law against domestic violence last year.

Here, Ms. Kato, 58, lectures tirelessly on the issue, and advocates for treatment for batterers. She was recently appointed to the board of the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance.

"I'm Sherry's voice and Cedric's voice," she said. "If one person will listen to me, I'll be happy."

Ms. Kato's dedication to her cause is reflective of the union's drive to assist struggling women since the 19th century, said Ms. Trevisan, who added the organization is gradually converting its name to The Women's Union.

Founded during a wave of immigration, the organization was the brainchild of Dr. Harriet Clisby, who enlisted the support of social reformers and abolitionists Louisa May Alcott and Julia Ward Howe. They believed that low-income women and their families needed an advocate.

Initially, the union opened a shop, where women would produce handiwork to sell to help support their families. The organization also formed a legal protection agency to represent the rights of immigrants.

"This organization was a revolutionary concept in its time for a city like Boston," Ms. Trevisan noted.

Over the years, the organization, which started the nation's first credit union in 1913, evolved with the times. Today, it operates two transitional homes for battered and homeless women. It offers job training for disadvantaged women and home health care for those who are elderly and disabled. And it still operates the shop, which specializes in items and gifts created by women artists, entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses.

The union, which has 2,500 members and an annual budget of \$5 million, is about to

embark on a campaign to raise \$3.5 million by end of 2003 to expand its work.

Meanwhile, the organization will hold its 19th annual Amelia Earhart Awards luncheon at the Boston Marriott on Nov. 22. Why Ms. Earhart? She taught English at one of the union's settlement houses for immigrant children several years before she became the first woman to pilot a plane solo across the Atlantic in 1932. This year's award recipient is Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University.

The organization remains dedicated to improving the economic status of families, Ms. Trevisan said, and, with other social service groups, is now starting a statewide effort to have a law enacted that would adopt updated self-sufficiency standards to reflect what it actually costs a family of four to live in Massachusetts. In Worcester, the cost is \$40,000 a year; in Boston, \$ 45,000.

"That's for the very basics," Ms. Trevisan said. "No car, no entertainment, no savings."

The standard would become the official reference for legislators, key state agencies, career centers, nonprofit organizations and the state Board of Higher Education.

In deciding what to write about each of the women honored in the exhibition, union officials thought it would be interesting to ask each one this question: What inspired you to make a difference?

Ms. Hall, the director of the Willis Center Cultural Institute, who grew up in a rural community in Georgia, credited her grandmother and great-aunt with setting an example she wanted to follow.

"I admired them and the work they did," she said. "They provided the inspiration for me."

Following in her sister's footsteps, Ms. Hall moved to Boston. She graduated from Northeastern University, becoming the first member of her family to earn a college degree. She went on to sell commercial and industrial real estate and manage shopping centers. She was instrumental in the

redesign and ultimate success of Olde Shrewsbury Village.

She now directs the cultural center's African-American Festival, and is working on new multicultural projects.

Ms. Hall said she was surprised to be included in the exhibition -- all the more so when she saw the company she was keeping.

Ms. Trevisan said Ms. Hall's reaction is typical.

"A lot of these women did not see themselves as special or important," she said. "They asked, 'Why was I chosen?' That makes for a true leader: Someone who does the work she's inspired to do, and does not think about whether she will be honored for it."

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'Every Woman's Voice: 125 Years of Women's Leadership'

What: An exhibition of portraits of 125 leading Massachusetts women and historical photographs of the Women's Educational & Industrial Union

Where: Worcester Public Library, 1 Salem Square, Worcester

When: Through Nov. 30

How much: Free

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS; (1) T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN; (1) Quinsigamond Community College President Sandra Kurtinitis poses outside the Worcester school whose fortunes she has transformed. Ms. Kurtinitis was named among the most influential women in Massachusetts by the Women's Educational & Industrial Union. (2) This Robert Bachrach portrait of Yoko Kato honors a woman who turned the personal tragedy of her daughter's and grandson's murders into a tireless quest to end domestic violence.

LOAD-DATE: November 6, 2002

