

Virginia (Ginger) Harris

Activist Biography

I grew up in a very progressive middle-class family in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. I & my 2 brothers were outdoors all the time except for meals & school. We loved participatory sports. In high school I focused on history & language. In college I focused on political science & foreign languages. I attended grad school for a Masters in Urban & Regional Planning, after which I got short-term planning jobs in St. Louis, New York City, Austin (TX), and abroad. For several months I volunteered with the “peanut butter brigade” in D.C. during the 1968 primary campaign until RFK, Sr. was shot and other candidates suspended their campaigns.

In 1969 I married & settled in St. Louis and worked full-time in long-range planning for St. Louis County until giving birth to my only child in 1971. I then stopped working full-time during her pre-school years.

Dissatisfied with long-range planning, with producing reports that would sit on a shelf, I was thrilled to find a planning job with the metropolitan transit agency that served 5 counties. I enjoyed the interaction with agency employees, with local officials, and with passengers. My most interesting work involved planning & implementing light rail around 1980 after our extensive street car system had been replaced by highways. My happiest achievement was getting the agency to install bicycle racks on all their buses.

After 29 years of service with the transit agency, and at my daughter’s urging, I retired in 2004 in order to be more available to visit her young family with their first child in Boston. Simultaneously I moved back into my parents’ home, both to spend time with a brother who rarely visited St. Louis, and also to spend more time with my 89-year-old parents. My parents & I then lived together for the next 11 years. During my subsequent, more leisurely annual trips to Boston, my St. Louis brother took care of our parents. During the 10 months of each year that I was primary care-taker, I remained active in supporting allies in the legislature, advocating for non-fossil-fuel modes of transportation, supporting urban gardens, replacing coal & nuclear power with alternative sources, using non-hackable voting systems, and stopping our wars in the Middle East & elsewhere.

After my parents died in 1915, my mate & I moved to the Boston area to be closer to my 2 grandchildren. Mark & I participated in a few rallies in downtown Boston & met some WILPFers who drew me into more activities, including their Saturday morning lobby letter & business meetings via Zoom, which I cherish.

Responses to Questions on Application

1. WILPF US is a mission-driven membership organization. What does that mean to you?

WILPF is not a “social club” for making friends primarily to “have fun with,” although WILPF provides many opportunities for making friends & deepening friendships. WILPF is “mission-driven” in that its members are motivated by a common purpose beyond themselves: to make the quality of **all** people’s lives better: more fulfilling, more economically secure, more fair & just, less fearful, no matter where they live, who their ancestors were, and what their gender, educational or economic differences are. WILPF members do this by working on many issues: towards international peace, reduction of uncontrollable weapons (e.g. nuclear, & robotic), environmental sustainability, justice, and an understanding of economics & politics.

2. Please describe your involvement in WILPF, including a brief summary of work at the level of branch, national, and/or international:

One of the first WILPF activities I participated in was the Child Education Committee, a discussion group of young mothers led by an older member/child psychologist in St. Louis, MO. Since I did not work full-time until my daughter entered 1st grade, I began to participate in all types of WILPF-sponsored activities, including monthly board meetings, annual membership meetings, International Women’s Day vigils, Tax Day leafletting, Women in Black vigils, Hiroshima-Nagasaki memorials, ant-war-toy leafletting at Thanksgiving, and tabling at college campuses. I also attended ant-Vietnam-war rallies & marches that WILPF carried out with other organizations. Once I returned to full-time work in 1976, I participated only in weekend or evening activities. During 1 or 2 years in late 1980s I chaired our monthly branch meetings.

3. Why are you interested in filling this position?

Two members of the Boston Branch of WILPF asked me to consider running for one of several positions on WILPF’s National Board. Of the 3 or 4 options, I felt my talents could best be used in a secretarial role, because of my grammar training and because I’m more of a listener than a talker. Because of my family responsibilities, plus my desire to continue writing lobby letters with our Boston Branch committee, I proposed to begin this position as under-study to WILPF’s current Secretary, Dianne Blais, who has agreed to continue doing parts of the Secretarial job until I feel equipped to take over the job completely.

4. Please describe your other non-WILPF work or involvement that you believe helps qualify you for this position:

From 1993 to 2015, I became heavily involved with the Sierra Club in Missouri, where I became a state executive committee member, co-chair of the chapter’s Transportation Committee, Secretary of National Sierra Club’s Transportation Committee, and later on for 2 years the Chair of the Missouri Chapter. As a member of the local Transportation Committee, I co-created a curriculum & contest we titled Re-Mobilize St. Louis, which brought groups from various high schools together to create ways to make their own towns safer for bicycling, walking & transit. During most of these 2 dozen years, I also served on the chapter’s Conservation Committee,

Legislative Committee (including lobbying at the state capitol), Political Committee (which involved a lot of canvassing that I advertised as “urban hikes”), and Energy Committee (including a 1.5 hour meeting of 3 of us with the Director of St. Louis metro area’s private electric utility). In 2010 I re-focused on the local St. Louis level, where I chaired an Urban Agriculture Committee which volunteered in the garden curriculum of an inner-city grade school and created a community vegetable garden in a minority neighborhood. In 2005, I joined with a small group of people — all strangers to each other — to try to ensure that the next election would not be so easily “stolen” as we all believed had happened to John Kerry in Ohio. The national Election Commission had been established..... to oversee the introduction of new electronic voting machines. We were wary of the machines’ trustworthiness, so we became involved with the St. Louis County Election Commission, attending their meetings & prompting additional opportunities for citizens to learn & express opinions about the Commissioners’ plans. We held speaking engagements — including with a California blogger who specialized in election integrity. We lobbied the Missouri legislature in favor of hand-marked paper ballots. We finally won this issue in 2018, 3 years after I’d moved to Massachusetts. Members of that group are still my dear friends.

5. What skills can you offer in this position?

Listening, verifying, writing and posting.

Letters of Recommendation

I joined the St. Louis Branch of WILPF in the 1960s, where I met Ginger's mother, Garnet F. Blake. Garnet's only daughter, Ginger Blake-Harris, started becoming active in WILPF after her own child became a toddler. Ginger brought her daughter to many WILPF functions.

Many St. Louis WILPF functions were hosted at the Blake family home, and Ginger participated in these when she was in town.

Ginger served as Branch Chair for at least 1 year. She also participated in most WILPF events and attended anti-Vietnam-war rallies & marches that WILPF carried out with cooperating organizations.

Since some of Ginger's favorite friends in St. Louis were women whom she met through WILPF, she wanted to have a luncheon for those of us who were "still around" when she visited St. Louis in 2022. We held this luncheon at my house. When she returned to Acton, MA, she arranged to have copies of Medea Benjamin & N.Davies' book War in Ukraine sent to the ten of us from a local St. Louis bookstore.

I'm glad to learn that Ginger is being considered for a position on the WILPF-US Board.

Joyce Best, St. Louis Branch of WILPF

Dear Nominating Committee Members,

I am delighted to take this opportunity to write a letter of recommendation for Ginger Harris. She is an excellent candidate and will be able to do whatever is expected of her. She is a responsible, reliable person. Her intelligence allows her to comprehend complexity. She is able to compose a letter that is relevant to the subject matter. I have seen her in difficult situations in which she is able to maintain her composure and act as an agent of calm. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Jane A. Brown, Boston Branch of WILPF, 11-8-23

Candidate's Statement

I am running for the position of WILPF-US Secretary because I was asked by 2 members of the Boston Branch of WILPF to consider running for one of several positions on WILPF's National Board. Of the 3 or 4 options, I felt my talents could best be used in a secretarial role, because of my grammar training and because I'm more of a listener than a talker. Because of my family responsibilities, plus my desire to continue writing lobby letters with our Boston Branch committee, I proposed to begin this position as under-study to WILPF's current Secretary, Dianne Blais, who has agreed to share parts of the Secretarial job until I feel equipped to take over the job completely.

I am also running for this position on the board because I share all the positions that WILPF promotes on all the political, social & economic issues of today's world, and most prominently the issues of peace, justice, & the environment. I want to make sure that WILPF remains an effective & influential organization!

Because of my involvement with WILPF over the decades, I'm familiar with many kinds of activities that WILPF could promote at the branch level besides monthly board meetings. Examples include annual membership meetings with a prominent speaker to attract a wide audience, International Women's Day vigils, Tax Day leafletting, Women in Black vigils, Hiroshima-Nagasaki memorials, anti-war-toy leafletting at Thanksgiving, tabling at college campuses, and of course anti-war rallies & marches. My current favorite is the weekly lobby-letter-writing zoom meetings of the Boston Branch, for 3 reasons: (1) it can have an impact on our political decision-makers, (2) it requires me to keep up with world news, and (3) it allows me to participate from home all year around.

I believe that my activities with other organizations in St. Louis (e.g. Sierra Club & Missourians for Honest Elections) provided me with additional experience influencing politicians & the public which can be useful as I participate on the Board of WILPF-US.