

Orientation, The Wall, Navigator Panel...



UNION WOMEN at the Summer Institute. Photo: Lorene Oikawa

By Lorene Oikawa

After a quick glance at the list of events for the Summer Institute for Union Women, you may think you're reading the schedule for a new reality show.

In some respects, you could say it's the ultimate reality show: picture a supportive environment where union women learn skills and share their ideas and experience. And yes, it's also fun.

The 10th B.C. Federation of Labour Summer Institute for Union Women took place from July 4-8 at the BCIT Burnaby campus. Union women, representing unions from across Canada, joined in the celebration of this year's theme, *Together We Share—Together We Build*.

Pam St. Thomas, a BCGEU member from Nelson, said, "We have a lot more support and resources at our fingertips."

The five-day institute included workshops and events covering a range of topics from leadership to globalization.

The Wall is an exercise to recognize barriers ("wall") to women's success, celebrate women's achievements and plan next steps to breaking down the wall.

Sarah De Steur, a BCGEU member and first-time participant from Delta, is thinking about her next steps. "I thought it was exhilarating and it opened my eyes. There is so much to do...a lot of changes to be made. I

thought it was all done [that] someone had done all the work."

The Navigator Panel provided another opportunity for reflection and energized the audience.

The panel, Angela Schira, secretary-treasurer of the B.C. Federation of Labour, Diane Wood, BCGEU secretary-treasurer, and Patrice Pratt, BCGEU director, talked about their introduction to union activism and evolving leadership roles.

Schira took advantage of some props (including a long hair wig) and entertained the audience with a visual representation of how she looked when she first started as an activist.

Not all the activities took place at BCIT. Participants marched, chanted and waved placards at the Purdy's Chocolate Factory on Kingsway in Burnaby. The striking women workers enjoyed the show of support and so did many of the commuters who sounded their car horns as they passed by the demonstration.

On Sunday, the final day of the institute, the participants shared some final thoughts and spoke of their determination to work on next steps.

"It was an incredible experience," says Ruby Johnson. Johnson, a BCGEU attendee, travelled from Courtenay to participate in this, her first, summer institute. "I'm one of those people living in a bubble. The bubble has burst."

Lorene Oikawa is 1st vice-chair of Local 1204.