

# Dinner party serves up some real soul food



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**WASHINGTON**

— I'm sitting at one end of a long dining table covered by dishes of Chinese food and glasses of water and wine. Seated at the table are 10 other women, each of whom is accomplished, respected and delightful. The conversation is never-ending, for each of these women has so much to offer: intellect, opinion and wit all at once. I keep thinking that someone ought to pinch me.

To my right is the host, Linda Aaker, one of the most gregarious people I've ever met. A native Dallasite like myself, Linda put this fabulous dinner together by calling five other women between the ages of 40 and 55. Each of these women asked a young person, age 20 to 35.

The introductions of Linda, who's a lawyer and author, make each of us feel accomplished — even honored.

Her background isn't typical of Washington. She went to Thomas Jefferson High School and eventually to the University of Texas Law School. She practiced law for 18 years and became a partner at a top law firm in Austin before moving here with her husband, Bob Armstrong, an assistant secretary at the Interior Department and a former Texas land commissioner.

To my left is Carolyn Curiel, senior speech writer for President Clinton. In fact, Carolyn is the only female on the president's domestic speech-writing team and the first minority ever hired as a White House speech writer. Because I had recently worked on a draft of a speech for Mrs. Clinton, I was seated next to Carolyn.

Jeanie Nelson, who was general counsel of the Environmental Protection Agency and an aide to Vice President Al Gore, brings the house down with her humor. Allida Black, an Eleanor Roosevelt expert and author, fills us in on her latest thesis about the role and impact of first ladies. Phyllis Shearer-Jones, an assistant U.S. trade representative, recalls stories of growing up in D.C., "in the shadow of the government." Another, Mary Kopper, is the program director of an institute dedicated to the study of immunology and aging.

No one cares that the dishes don't match, that the Chinese food was delivered. Husbands, children, fashion and recipes are not the focus here, not that there is anything wrong with that. But this evening is for intellectual discourse, for our minds and for our aspirations. This was why I moved to Washington in the first place. And frankly, I had forgotten.

It is more than an exchange of ideas. We all know the news of the day; we are discussing how to make things better, exchanging our interpretations of political and cultural trends. I know what we say matters, that it will be carried far beyond the edge of the tablecloth.

There was a time when Linda Aaker's life would have been easier with the guidance and encouragement of a mentor. Now she hosts these dinners to create situations where mentor relationships and bonding can take hold.

Business cards are flying. We all have ideas for each other, people to contact, ways to help the others realize their potential. In the end, the younger people are giving as well as receiving supportive ideas. This is especially gratifying.

When I was a little girl growing up in Dallas, a friend of my mother's named Adlene Harrison decided to run for City Council. I seem to recall licking a few stamps or stuffing a few envelopes. What I recall vividly is this tall, lanky woman with the sharp wit talking with Mom about issues of the day. Barbara Jordan may have been one of my heroes, but Adlene was a visitor in my house!

Eventually, Adlene became the first woman mayor of Dallas. Later, President Carter appointed her to be the regional administrator for the EPA. She led the fight for DART and much more. Adlene was a local hero for me. I hung on to her every word. Through her, I could see that a life of significant contribution was achievable.

At Linda's dining table, I find myself thinking of Adlene Harrison and the late Barbara Jordan. I think they would have loved the dinner, and it's because of women like them that the dinner even took place.

Those gathered at this table were women whose lives had taken them in different directions, women interested in mentoring others, women supporting each other. Women everywhere have too much at stake to live life any other way.

*Allison Silberberg's award-winning film, Poppy, was recently shown on KERA (Channel 13) and KDTN (Channel 2).*

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