

"Educator and Advocate"

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Betty's passing has left us with a big hole, which is reflected in the attendance today. I want to thank the Rice family for including all of us in the celebration of Betty's life. You've so graciously shared your mom for so long, with so many, and I hope the turn-out today is a comfort to you.

It's an honor to share a few thoughts about Betty's contributions, and I will attempt to do so without too many tears. I will adhere to the advice of one who is on the stage today, who instructed me yesterday, "Don't blubber. You know she would hate it if we blubbered."

Those of us gathered here today know of her many accomplishments in the areas of politics, law, and mediation. She is known far & wide for her sharp legal mind and her tenacity for social justice. So much of Betty's life was spent in public service that is widely known and deeply appreciated – these are the contributions that come readily to mind in recent tributes to this unique and talented woman. But some of her greatest accomplishments were rarely chronicled because they were performed quietly, and often without attribution. I wish to speak today of her deep and abiding passion for education, and her pride in being an educated woman. To Betty, and to me, education is the great equalizer.

It is fitting that we honor Betty here at PSU today – that we gather here was her explicit instruction. And of course all of us who know and love Betty *always* follow her explicit instructions So it is not by chance that we find ourselves on the largest of Oregon's public universities. That was her wish.

Betty forged her deep interest in education as a young woman and it was a passion she held throughout her life. As a child of the Depression, Betty had watched her mother and father suffer through that time, and she learned personally "the stark fear of being without food" (7). Her mother was proud to usher Betty and her siblings into school, and as a

consequence Betty learned early that the most reliable path to financial stability and personal fulfillment would be through the door of a school house.

She sought an education for herself at a time when few women ventured out of the home. But in the 1940s, smart women could be teachers, and for that Betty would need a college degree. So in 1940, she enrolled briefly at Texas Wesleyan, but after marrying, Betty's education was postponed because of the strictures of that time: young wives should live the life of the home, not of the mind.

In 1955 Betty made a second attempt at college. This time, living in LaGrande with her husband and four young children, Betty enrolled in Eastern Oregon University when her youngest, Dian, was at afternoon kindergarten. Betty remembered that day as "exceptionally glorious," but she was not there for the beauty. Betty had growing "...concerns about providing for [her] family. How could I do more?" she asked herself. (p. 33) As she recalls in her memoir, "...[she] knew from experience that ... [women] needed to be educated to work outside the home, to help support the family, and to develop some measure of financial independence." And so she arrived, white gloves and all, back at college. But it was still not to be.

The family moved again a year later, this time to Portland. Fortunately, a wise professor at EOU recognized her potential, "You must keep going to college. There is a brand new state college in Portland. I don't know its name, but you must go and find it." (36)

Betty recalls, "As we were settling into the new Portland house and getting the three older children into their new schools, I went in search of the new Portland State College, which was housed in the former Lincoln High School in downtown Portland. The staff, eager to help, scheduled all my classes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays: that way Randy would need child care only three days a week. Because my education continued to stretch us financially, I inquired about student jobs and landed in the library working 15 hours a week for a dollar an hour. I would have to work two evenings a week." (37)

"Learning was electrifying. Sparks of ideas, information, theories, and insights charged around into my brain...I'd unlocked the door that was right for me, and I had to open that

door and walk through. I'd just as soon do nothing the rest of my life but go to school. It was as close as I've ever been to a spiritual experience" (39)

And so in 1958 she graduated with a BS in Education from Portland State, and went on to receive a Masters in Political Science from the University of Oregon, where her thesis topic was on the legislature's 1957 elimination of kindergarten funding. Foreshadowing of things to come.

Of course, she wasn't one to stop with her own education. She quickly became an education advocate, first through her years as a high school teacher and then on the Lynch Elementary School Board, and next through her election to the legislature, where she introduced fully-funded, full day kindergarten her first session in 1965, and every session she served after that. As Betty said, "Someday kindergartens will come to the State of Oregon....I don't know how or when, but it must happen" (unabridged). Noting the legislators in the room, I can't help but mention that 50 years later, Oregon children are still waiting for fully funded, full-day kindergarten.

As a state representative in 1967, she also supported "expanding the school lunch program for children who could not afford to pay for lunch." In public hearings, one opponent testified that free lunches were waste of taxpayer money. Hearing this, Betty recalls, "I became a child again in grade school With only my mother's bread for lunch. I was right back reliving the time she gave me a nickel for a bowl of soup, and I bought an ice cream bar instead and got sick....I sat quietly, feeling nauseated again, knowing that I would support the school lunch program, because that man was wrong, dead wrong."

As many of us know, Betty also felt the sting of exclusion from education. She learned personally that often education is available but the road to the schoolhouse is not paved. All her life, she had to fight for her education and for that of others. Betty sought to achieve that educational brass ring, the PhD, and was told that at 39, she was too old: the taxpayers of Oregon would never see a return on their investment. Looking at the record of this incredible woman, and her contributions to the state of Oregon, I think we can say with confidence that Oregon benefited tremendously from its investment. I wonder sometimes

where the next Betty Roberts is – at Eastern, Mt. Hood, or Portland State – and whether we are doing enough to help her achieve all she is meant to accomplish.

Of course, even in that disappointment, she persevered, turning her regret over a PhD into a JD. That JD translated into Betty's work in the law of course, but it also laid the ground work for her continued advocacy for education access. Without access to affordable public education, we might never have known the Betty Roberts we love, nor her many achievements.

Betty continued to learn and teach her entire life. She would come to my classes, and those of colleagues at OSU, and share insights with rapt audiences of students. She committed her knowledge to those she mentored informally, and through OWLs, Emerge, and NEW Leadership Oregon. We often joked that she could return to PSU, enroll in our PhD program, and take my classes. I imagine having Betty enrolled in my Women and the Law course A daunting prospect.

And she never stopped testing me. Betty was still engaging me in her version of the Socratic method only a few weeks ago. When we would visit, she would drill me on what I was reading, urging me to explain how the recent read had shaped my thinking, challenged my beliefs, made me better. And she asked what my children read – like Betty, I am a mother of four, and we often shared the travails of having such a brood and a full professional life as well.

In her last days, Betty finally received her PhD – and honorary doctorate from PSU. Just days before commencement, Betty and I were on the phone. “Melody,” she said, “please tell President Wiewel how proud I am of PSU. When I was a student there, you were just a one-building college. Today I look out my east-facing windows and see your plans for the waterfront; from my west-facing windows I see your newest dorm.” Betty was gratified to receive her PhD from an institution where we believe in our core that education is the great equalizer. Betty believed in the radical potential of education to change lives because it had changed hers.

We at PSU are so very proud to celebrate Betty's life and to share her deep love of public education. And though we no longer have her among us as a teacher and a guide, we are privileged to house the Betty Roberts archive – a special collection of her papers that are being processed so that her teaching will continue to reach generations of students, researchers, and journalists to come.

Two years ago, PSU's Center for Women, Politics & Policy gave its highest award – the lifetime achievement award – to Betty. In accepting it, she told the audience of 500 that she was not ready to pass her torch, “get your own,” she told us. Wherever Betty is, I know her torch is still shining brightly. Today, those of us who were so privileged to know Betty honor her not by mourning our loss but by carrying our own torches: for civil rights and liberties, for reproductive rights, and for education for everyone who seeks it. I know my torch shines more brightly because of Betty's inspiration. I will continue to honor this woman we love through my commitment to opening the doors of education. Whether I have done this well enough – well, *I'll let her be the judge.*