

"Politician"

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It's my honor and privilege to be able to talk about my friend Betty Roberts as a, campaigner, strategist and a politician.

Betty called campaigns "The fever that comes after being bitten by the political bug." Her plan, learned through the school of hard knocks, was: outwork the opposition and use new techniques to reach the voters. Her mantra was "Be everywhere; do everything".

Betty wasn't exactly what you would call a "soft touch" on the campaign trail. While raising money for her '68 campaign against incumbent Tom Mahoney she approached a lobbyist for help. The lobbyist said "I like you Betty, but Tom is an incumbent. If you win the primary I'll be behind you 100%". Betty's retort was "you know, I like you too. And, if one of your bills ever gets out of my committee I'll be behind you 100%."

The first time I met Betty was in 1966. I was a young field worker for the Straub for Governor campaign. Betty walked into campaign headquarters with good suggestions about how Bob and she could work East County together. George Russill, my campaign director, and my problems weren't with Betty but with Bob; he'd rather be at his ranch in Spray, population 160, than in East County, population 160,000.

Now you've probably heard of the Tudor Dynasty or Ming Dynasty or the Kennedy Dynasty, but Oregon has its own dynasty – Roberts. While in most dynasties we think of passing the mantle from father to son, or mother to daughter, that wasn't *exactly* the pattern with the Roberts Dynasty. According to then staffer (and later Governor) Barbara Roberts, in the 1975 Session at one time there were 4 Roberts: Barbara and three Senators, Frank, Mary "Wendy", Frank's daughter by an earlier marriage (and later to be Labor Commissioner), and Betty. One morning at the start of the Senate session Frank and Barbara were standing, heads bowed, while the chaplain's prayer of the day washed over them. As the prayer proceeded, arriving a little late, Mary "Wendy" stood and bowed her head beside

Frank and Barbara rather than crossing the chamber to her own desk. Then, arriving even a little later was Betty, who likewise stood beside Barbara, Frank, and Mary “Wendy,” rather than crossing the Senate floor to her desk. As the prayer ended and the 4 of them stood there together, in a soft voice Betty said: “The family that prays together stays together.”

Today we think of “**branding**” as associated with products, but politicians call it, “**name familiarity.**” While Betty won a school board position as Betty Rice, she lost her first legislative race in 1962 as Betty Roberts. When she married Keith Skelton the newspapers wanted to call her Ms. Keith Skelton. One day in 1970, while running for the Portland City Council, Connie McCready (later to be mayor of Portland), called Betty to say a sign had been posted in the Portland City Hall newsroom that henceforth in the *Oregonian*, Connie would be called Mrs. Constance McCready and Betty would be called Mrs. Elizabeth Skelton. Betty was incensed – her given name was Betty and by this time she was a lawyer and established politician with name familiarity. She met with the then editor of *The Oregonian*, Richard Nokes, and showed him an opinion from Legislative Counsel and another from the Oregon State Bar, all confirming her right to use “Betty Roberts.” He resisted a bit, and as she got up to leave, Betty said: “Mr. Nokes, if you run any reference to me other than as Betty Roberts you’ll have a lawsuit on your hands.” Later she heard newsroom rumors that Nokes had consulted the paper’s lawyer. After reviewing the documents, counsel replied, “I have to tell you that if you use any name other than Betty Roberts, she’ll own *The Oregonian.*”

Betty was a pretty skilled legislative politician as well. Now if you were a Straub for Governor supporter in the 1974 general election, you would have heard the quote from his opposition, Victor Atiyeh: “I was the first senator to vote for the bottle bill.” And that’s true – In the Senate there was a roll call by alphabet, and A is always first. But here’s the rest of the story. Betty Roberts was the chair of the Senate committee that heard the bottle bill in the 1971 session. After a large hearing, where all the “suits” from the can and bottle companies had flown in on their private jets to testify, a lobbyist suggested a simple amendment that would broaden the definition of the bottle/can, and the attorney general’s office said the definition was sufficiently precise to withstand a challenge. After adopting

the amendment, the bill came out of her committee with a “do pass” recommendation on a split vote, and she carried the bill on the floor. Betty walked onto the Senate floor for the debate and found hundreds of different cans, bottles and other containers, all stacked on various opponents’ desks, with question after question: is this covered? Is this covered? And she knew the committee had been sandbagged by the definition change. The opponents garnered the votes to refer the bill back to committee and, because it was late in the session, they thought that was the end of it. As the post-vote chaos was sorting itself out quick-witted Betty announced from the floor a committee meeting that afternoon. She knew she had 3 votes on the committee – Don Willner’s, Hector MacPherson’s and hers. Punctually, they met, changed back to the old definition, moved the bill out and adjourned before the opposition and lobbyists showed up to the meeting. The next day the galleries were packed. Betty rose and gave an impassioned plea in her best extemporaneous style, leaving inferences that the aluminum, beer and soft drink people were trying to corrupt the system by offering money for Democratic campaigns in exchange for killing the bill. After her speech Senator Atiyeh moved to re-refer the bill, but the motion lost by 1 vote. The bottle passed the senate on a split vote, the first being Senator Atiyeh’s aye vote. Thus, Betty’s legislative political skills and tenacity gave us one of Oregon’s proudest legislative achievements.

Betty Roberts was not a “one trick pony.” Her political career was as multi-faceted as the times. In her work on issues of education, women, the environment, and civil rights she showed what one person can do. In the words of William Faulkner, she knew: “there is no such thing as equality per se, but only equality to: equal right and opportunity to make the best one can of one’s life within one’s capacity and capability, without fear of injustice or oppression or threat of violence.”

In making the best one can out of one’s life, Betty Robert's life shines a bright light for the rest of us to follow.