

Roberts' trailblazing spirit served all of us

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Betty Roberts, Oregon's first female Supreme Court justice, divorced her first husband because he didn't want her to work outside the home.

That poor guy never had a chance.

Roberts, a trailblazer for more than a quarter of a century in Oregon's politics, died Saturday of pulmonary fibrosis in her Portland home. She was 88.

She served on the high court from 1982 to 1986, but that's not the only arena where she was a pioneer. When she was elected to the state Senate in 1968, she was the only woman in that body.

Roberts dived into state politics in 1964, when she was elected to the Oregon House as a Democrat from Multnomah County. She won re-election in 1966. During her time in the Legislature, she was a co-sponsor of the nation's first bottle bill, which required bottles to be eligible for a refund to encourage recycling and reduce litter.

Other forays into politics weren't as successful: In 1974, she ran for governor but lost in the primary to Robert Straub, who won the seat. Later that year, when the Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate, Wayne Morse, died, Roberts filled his spot on the November ballot but lost to the incumbent, Republican Bob Packwood.

In 1977, Straub appointed Roberts to a new position on an expanded Oregon Court of Appeals, where she was the first female appellate judge. Gov. Vic Atiyeh elevated her to the Oregon Supreme Court in 1982, a position she resigned in 1986.

After leaving the bench, she served as a visiting professor in political science at Oregon State University and served on the state's Commission on Higher Education.

She leaves behind a legacy of women who followed her lead into Oregon's legal system and its politics, but it would be incomplete to say that her influence was felt only by the women she officially or unofficially mentored.

Anyone who's battled for the underdog or fought against injustice has had a touch of Betty Roberts' spirit. That spirit prompted Roberts to lead the fight in the Oregon Senate for the Equal Rights Amendment. That spirit is on display in her opinion in the workers' compensation case *Hewitt v. SAIF*, which found that men and women have the same rights under the Oregon Constitution. And that spirit could be seen when she presided over the first legal same-sex marriage, when it was briefly allowed in Multnomah County.

That first husband got a full dose of Betty Roberts' spirit. The rest of us have, as well, and we're all richer for it.