

## Betty Roberts - Pioneering Jurist

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**Betty Roberts**, the first woman to serve on the Oregon appellate bench, died June 25, 2011 at age 88. She left an unprecedented legacy through her personal achievements in Oregon government and by inspiring and encouraging other women to be full participants in civic life.

When Roberts was 30 years old and the mother of four children, she went back to school to become a teacher, a career that she knew was open to women. She started at night school at Eastern Oregon College in LaGrande. Then, when she and her family moved to Portland to support her husband's career, she enrolled at Portland State College. Roberts was a member of the college's second graduating class in 1958.

Roberts began her career outside the home teaching high school social studies in Portland. While teaching, she began work on a master's degree in political science at the University of

Oregon in Eugene. Roberts found that there were few women studying political science and that the political science department had never had a female faculty member. When she finished her masters in 1962, Roberts decided that she could better meet her objectives by entering law school. She started night school at Northwestern School of Law—now Lewis & Clark Law School—in 1962. Roberts obtained her JD degree in 1966.

In the meantime, in 1964, Roberts won election to the Oregon House of Representatives. She served two terms there and then, in 1968, won a seat in the Oregon Senate where she was the lone woman Senator. Throughout her legislative career, Roberts championed a broad range of legislative reforms that removed legal disabilities for women.

Oregon had never had a woman on its appellate courts when Governor Straub appointed Roberts to a newly created position on the Court of Appeals in 1977. Roberts was elected to a full six year term on the Court of Appeals in 1978. Then, in 1982, Roberts was again the first when Governor Atiyeh appointed her to the Oregon Supreme Court. Roberts won election to a six year term on that court later in 1982.

Roberts resigned her position on the Oregon Supreme Court in 1986 and took senior status. Thereafter, she helped found the Women's Investment Network-PAC to recruit and support women to run for the legislature, and helped found Oregon Women Lawyers to promote

women and minorities in the profession. Justice Roberts pioneered alternative dispute resolution in Oregon and continued to contribute to the legal profession with her highly successful mediation and arbitration work until shortly before her death.

Roberts was the recipient of numerous awards including the Oregon State Bar Association's Award of Merit (1987), the Oregon Women Lawyers' Betty Roberts Award created to recognize lawyers who promote women in the profession (1992) and the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award(2006), established by the American Bar Association to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of women lawyers who have excelled in their field and have paved the way to success for other women lawyers.

Oregon Judges have this to say about Roberts as a pioneering jurist:

**Paul De Muniz, Chief Justice, Oregon Supreme Court:**

Betty Roberts was a true Oregon pioneer -- a trail-blazer as a legislator, as a professional woman, and as a judge. She was the first female judge on both the Oregon Court of Appeals and the Oregon Supreme Court, and wrote path-breaking opinions for both courts from the moment she stepped on the bench. During her tenure as a judge and after she left the bench, she inspired and mentored countless people – including me -- to become lawyers and judges and serve the public by upholding the rule of law. Oregon has lost a legal luminary.

**David Brewer, Chief Judge, Oregon Court of Appeals:**

Betty Roberts was the greatest judicial pioneer in Oregon history. Although she never forgot the pain of discrimination, she always kept her faith in people.

**Ann Aiken, Chief Judge, US District Court:**

As a 20-year-old UO student and legislative staffer, I had my life changed while watching Senator Roberts carrying the equal rights amendment on the Senate floor. . . I would not have the career or the privileges I have had to serve on the benches of Oregon without her inspiration, support and wise counsel.

**Susan Graber, Judge, US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals:**

Betty Roberts and her husband, Keith Skelton, played a big role in my professional life. They directly convinced me I could run and were very supportive. She was an important influence for many women.

**Virginia Linder, Associate Justice, Oregon Supreme Court:**

Betty was a beacon of inspiration for an entire generation of women lawyers. I am among the countless women who gained a personal sense of what was possible in our careers by her remarkable example and her unflinching encouragement and support of others. Her mark on Oregon will be a lasting one.

**Martha Walters, Associate Justice, Oregon Supreme Court:**

I cannot imagine that this court will ever again be blessed to have a justice, woman or man, of her courage, commitment and compassion. Betty's determination made everyone who knew her reach higher and try harder. She was a great leader.

**Ellen Rosenblum, Senior Judge, Oregon Court of Appeals:**

Betty Roberts was a great Oregonian. She was the mother of Oregon women lawyers and judges and our mentor-in-chief.

**Darleen Ortega, Judge, Oregon Court of Appeals:**

Betty never stopped teaching, never stopped leading, never stopped inspiring--not least because she never stopped learning, never stopped listening, and was so attentive to the lessons her own life continually taught her. Her example of courage and grace under tremendous pressure literally kept me from giving up early in my career--and her guidance and encouragement has cheered and fortified me in the years since I have been a judge. The reach of her influence, particularly on generations of women leaders in Oregon, is incalculable.

Photo courtesy of [Diane Inskeep Photography](#).