

## Betty Roberts, a true Oregon pioneer

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By **The Oregonian Editorial Board**



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Betty Roberts (right) greets Rosalynn Carter in May 1976. Roberts was co-chairwoman for the Carter campaign in Oregon. Her more groundbreaking roles included state senator and judge. (The Oregonian/1976)

Betty Roberts often heard the word "no" during the first half of her life. No to finishing college, teaching or running for public office, and no to following her ambitions.

She ignored most of that advice. By doing so, she became one of the great figures of Oregon politics.

**Roberts died Saturday in her Portland home at the age of 88, with her children close by.**

Her death prompted swift remembrances of the woman whose most prominent career achievement was her ascension in 1982 to the Oregon Supreme Court. That capstone event doesn't fully capture her decades-long role in culture and politics, however. Roberts was an Oregon pioneer from almost the moment she arrived.

Roberts grew up in Texas and left college early to get married and start a family. She and her husband moved to Oregon after World War II. When their youngest child was a toddler, Roberts decided to finish her degree and become a teacher -- a decision that set poorly at home and helped precipitate a divorce, according to her 2008 memoir, **"With Grit and By Grace."**

The 1950s housewife found herself entering the 1960s with a bang: teaching, earning her master's degree, securing a seat on a local school board and getting remarried.

Before long, the school board wasn't enough. She won a seat as a state representative and, later, as state senator. She also entered law school after she tried to become a doctoral candidate in political science and was told "no." Her legal expertise gave her an edge in state politics and emboldened her to run unsuccessfully for governor and U.S. senator. Ultimately, she was appointed in 1977 as a judge on the Court of Appeals and then, about five years later, to the Oregon Supreme Court.

Along the way, she supported the state's bottle bill and better land-use laws. She also devoted herself to giving women in Oregon better options. Her groundbreaking work on issues including abortion rights, domestic violence, divorce law and sexual assault changed the landscape for women in this state.

So did her unapologetic advocacy for her own equality, whether she was running for office or simply trying to find a decent women's bathroom in the state Capitol. By seeking out male and female mentors wherever she could, and by shrugging off some icy receptions along the way, Roberts made Oregon more hospitable to working women -- especially female judges and political candidates.

Roberts has been honored and lionized many times since her retirement from the high court. It is tempting to eulogize her as a legend, to airbrush the complications and failures of her life story and focus entirely on the bullet-point achievements. This would be a mistake. Roberts' real gift was her resourcefulness, a mixture of persistence and confidence that made small daily triumphs possible.

"(I had) a reasonable desire to live the life I wanted," she wrote in her memoir. That desire formed a compass pointing her over the years toward family, toward career and home again.

It also fueled the thousand small steps necessary for a La Grande housewife named Betty to inevitably become Justice Roberts.



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Betty Roberts.