



Betty Roberts: Honoring a Trailblazer

By Jan Dilg

On July 28, 2011 approximately 400 people gathered in the Portland State University Ballroom to pay tribute to the Honorable Betty Roberts, who passed away on June 25 of pulmonary fibrosis. A force in the Oregon Legislature in the '60s and '70s, Roberts was the first woman on the Oregon Court of Appeals (1977-82) and the first woman on the Oregon Supreme Court (1982-86). After leaving the Oregon Supreme Court she established a career in alternative dispute resolution, primarily as a mediator, but also as an arbitrator. The Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell served as officiant as colleagues and family members recounted their relationships with Betty and the many ways she inspired and motivated them over the arc of her life. More often than not the personal and the professional associations were closely intertwined. The speakers recalled different periods of Roberts's life and career, but their remembrances shared common themes: courage, compassion, humor, generosity, intelligence, and persistence.

Melody Rose, Portland State University vice provost of academic programs and instruction, spoke of Betty Roberts' pride in being an educated woman, and her belief that "education was the great equalizer." Roberts's early career as a teacher, and later as a state legislator advocating for educational reforms and funding, grew out of her core belief in the importance of access to a good education for everyone. Robert Cantrell, Betty's older brother recalled that their mother instilled the value of education in all the Cantrell children. She made sure the children went to school and did their homework, because being poor was no excuse for not being educated.

During their shared childhood, the family's fortunes dissipated

when their father lost his health and ability to financially support them during the 1930s. It was then that Betty learned lessons she never forgot "about charity, the goodwill of people, and government organizations and programs." Cantrell remembered his sister's nascent fighting spirit. When teaching Betty to box, Cantrell recalled that after a few practice jabs, she punched him soundly in the nose, making it bleed. He asked his little sister why she hit him. "You challenged me to a fight. I thought you knew that I would hit you." "Perhaps," Cantrell pondered, "a few grown men in Oregon should have known of Betty's propensity to swing fast whenever challenged."

As several speakers noted, Roberts was a tireless advocate for equal rights, civil liberties, and reproductive rights. Longtime feminist advocate and elected official Gretchen Kafoury summed up Roberts as a role model for women this way: "She was what we wanted to be before we even knew what we wanted to be ourselves."

Chief Judge Ann Aiken recalled being enthralled by Roberts' electrifying floor speech on the Equal Rights Amendment in the Oregon State Senate in 1973 as an undergraduate at the University of Oregon. "Her torch was on fire and she owned the room with her passionate, articulate, and well-reasoned speech in favor of ratification." Aiken recalled that Roberts was not only "a spectacular mentor," but noted that Betty "welcomed" women and men, even younger than herself as "teachers, too." She was, "courageous enough to open herself to opportunity and challenge, to taking chances on people."

Former Chief Judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals, Mary Deits, and former Oregon Supreme Court Justice Sue Leeson noted Roberts' role as a trailblazer for women on the Oregon bench. Deits was clear that her time on the Court of Appeals was easier because Betty had "focused on being the best judge she could be" rather than waste time on adversarial battles.

Continue on page 10



Justice Betty Roberts and Judge Mercedes Diez. Photo courtesy of Oregon State Bar



From left: Judges Susan Graber, Ann Aiken, Anna Brown, and Betty Roberts with Katherine O'Neil and Norma Paulus at 2007 annual meeting.

When Leeson, then the only woman member of the Supreme Court, struggled with whether her decision to leave the court in 2002 would be a “betrayal to women.” Betty pragmatically counseled: “Quit. Go get well. Don’t ever look back.”

Family was just as important as career and public service were to Betty Roberts and finding a balance between those parts of her life was a priority. Daughter Dian Odell spoke on behalf of her siblings, John, Jo, and Randy. Their mother was many things over the course of her life, “and she wasn’t a miracle worker, she was just incredibly organized.” Betty Roberts was stay-at-home “mama,” night-school student (first college and later law school), and then single-working mother. Odell noted that through “all phases and ages, whatever it was, it was our normal.”

As Sue Leeson noted, Roberts did not retire in 1986 when she stepped down from the bench, but continued to serve Oregonians as an effective mediator through 2009. During the brief time that same-sex marriage was legal in Multnomah County, Betty performed the first ceremony. Despite her diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis disease, she continued to advise, mentor, and share her exper-

tise. When Roberts received the Center for Women, Politics and Policy’s Lifetime Achievement award in 2009, despite the advanced stage of her pulmonary disease, Roberts declared: “I’m not done with my torch yet. Go get your own.”

Betty Roberts was mindful of the value of documenting and preserving her life and her accomplishments for future generations. She recorded substantial oral histories that are available at the Oregon Historical Society. Those oral histories culminated in her book, *With Grit and By Grace: Breaking Trails in Politics and Law, A Memoir* written with Gail Wells, which is widely available. In addition, Betty Roberts’s papers are archived at the Oregon Political Leadership Archive at Millar Library and open to the public. Copies of the video recording of Betty Roberts’s Celebration of Life can be accessed online at www.bettyroberts.net. Click on the “Past Events” tab for links to the video, viewing tips, and a copy of the program. Articles based on talks Betty Roberts gave to an Oregon Women Lawyers Conference ran in the Winter 2000 and Spring 2001 issues of *Oregon Benchmarks*, available at www.usdchs.org