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Former Governor Inspires Women Leaders, Works To Preserve History

PATRICK WEBB | April 19, 2012 12:23 p.m.

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The DAILY ASTORIAN

(<http://www.dailyastorian.com>)

Oregon's motto is lived by Gov. Barbara Roberts.

Alis volat propriis, the Latin slogan on the state seal, translates as "she flies with her own wings."

Oregon's first woman governor – make that, Oregon's only woman governor – spoke in Astoria Wednesday at the Liberty Theater's McTavish Room.



She told an audience of 130 that the diaries of women Oregon Trail pioneers helped spur her to lead a campaign to preserve histories of Oregon women and tell her own story in an autobiography.

Roberts spoke at the Lady Liberty awards luncheon staged to honor Edith Henningsgaard Miller and Cheri Folk for their contributions to the community. All three received standing ovations from an appreciative audience at a new event which Liberty Theater board members plan to host annually.

Betsy Johnson, state senator for the North Coast, introduced the "indomitable" Roberts as a "glass-ceiling smasher," adding "she's the go-to person in Oregon for all things political."

Roberts is a fourth-generation Oregonian. She grew up in Sheridan and became involved in public service in the 1960s when her older son, Mike, was sent home from school in first grade because of his antisocial behavior (later diagnosed as autism). As a divorced single mother, working a low-paying office job, Roberts decided this was unjust, but Oregon had no law guaranteeing an education to students now covered by special education programs. So she took unpaid leave from work every Friday to lobby the Legislature until a law was passed - the first of its kind on the nation, years ahead of federal reforms.

"It changed my whole life," Roberts recalled. "Hard work and determination can change lives and communities."

Career of service

She served on the Parkrose School Board, Mount Hood Community College Board and the Multnomah County Commission before joining the Oregon Legislature in 1981. During her second term, she became the first woman House majority leader. She then served as Oregon secretary of state - the first Democrat in 110 years.

In 1991, when Gov. Neil Goldschmidt decided not to seek a second term, Roberts ran for governor. She served one term, 1991 to 1995, deciding not to seek a second, in part, because her second husband, state Sen. Frank Roberts, died while she was in office.

She wrote "Death Without Denial, Grief Without Apology," which has become a manual for the hospice community and a university-level text. Her more recent work is a political memoir, "Up the Capitol Steps," which chronicles her pioneering career.

"As one of America's first 10 women governors I was concerned that our place in history was being lost," she said. Only one other had written about her struggles and accomplishments. Four have since died. "The history of these political trailblazers needs to be saved," she said.

She worked for at least five years on her book, inspired by diaries of the hardy women and teenage girls who traveled West across the Plains and Rockies in wagon trains along the Oregon Trail.

“As women we have been a little too modest - perhaps we were a little too busy? – to share these stories.

“I believe strongly that I have lived in an amazing part of women's history in America. I have made a little history, I have shared a little history,” she said. “I feel privileged to have helped lay a little of that concrete on the uncharted path.”

Key years in history

This year is the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote in Oregon. Roberts said the men of the state voted in favor of allowing women's suffrage in 1912 after five failed ballot measures. Oregon joined Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Idaho and Washington in leading the way among Western states.

Roberts said women's opportunities and accomplishments have come a long way in 100 years, but were kick-started by controversy in the 1970s.

The failure of the campaign to make the U.S. Constitution gender-neutral spurred women to action in a positive way. “Women became more politicized after the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment than they ever would have been had it passed,” she said.

Roberts, who is filling out an unexpired term on the Portland Metro governing board, promises it will be her last public service.

As she bows out, she called on all those attending to become role models and mentors for a new generation of women leaders in Oregon.

Proud of his mom

Wednesday's honored duo were no strangers to receiving awards, both having earned the George Award from the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, essentially Astoria's citizen of the year.

But both appeared visibly moved by being honored by neighbors and colleagues with whom they have worked on community projects for several decades.

Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen acted as emcee for the event, but turned the introduction of the first recipient over to his childhood buddy Blair Henningsgaard, Astoria city attorney, to introduce his mother.

“She’s never known a nut that was too tough to crack, or a dream that was too distant or a person that she wouldn’t help,” Blair Henningsgaard said, listing some of her accomplishments, including being elected as Astoria's mayor three times.

She pioneered the Walldorf-Astoria city-school link, served on the board of the League of Oregon Cities, including a term as president in 1989, the Hanford Advisory Council and three significant North Coast projects, the Astoria Aquatic Center, the Astoria Column and the Liberty Theatre.

“She has helped change the face of the city,” he said.

Edith Henningsgaard Miller thanked those giving her the award. “This is an unbelievable thing. If I stand here

any longer I will start to cry,” she said. “It’s a great honor.”

Pioneering banker

Van Dusen introduced Cheri Folk and highlighted her banking and community leadership. She worked for the Bank of Astoria for 36 years. She was a pioneering bank president in Oregon, became the first woman elected chairman of the Oregon Bankers Association and was appointed by Gov. Roberts to the State Banking Board.

Her community service includes working with Liberty Restoration Inc., the Columbia River Maritime Museum, Columbia Memorial Hospital Foundation and the Clatsop County Historical Society.

“She’s very modest, a great leader and very intelligent,” said Van Dusen.

An emotional Folk looked around the crowded room and said she had enjoyed working with people sitting at each of the tables. “As a young girl, it was not even a dream that I would be able to be involved in the organizations that I have,” she said.

The event is planned to be held annually, said Rosemary Baker-Monaghan, executive director of the Liberty Theater. Nominations for next year’s award winners will be solicited online.

Lead sponsor for Wednesday’s event was Pacific Power. Other sponsors were Bank of Astoria, Bank of the Pacific, The Daily Astorian, NW Natural, Teevin Brothers and U.S. Bank. The artistic gifts presented to the award winners were donated by Ice Fire Glassworks of Cannon Beach.

This story originally appeared in [Daily Astorian](http://www.dailyastorian.com/free/former-governor-inspires-women-leaders-works-to-preserve-history/article_ed68abee-8a51-11e1-a7d6-001a4bcf887a.html) (http://www.dailyastorian.com/free/former-governor-inspires-women-leaders-works-to-preserve-history/article_ed68abee-8a51-11e1-a7d6-001a4bcf887a.html).

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