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Remembering Betty Roberts: For Good

By Diane Rynerson and Norma S. Freitas

Former Oregon Supreme Court Justice Betty Roberts died peacefully at home, surrounded by her family, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, June 25, 2011. She was 88.

*I've heard it said that people come into our lives for a reason, bringing something we must learn, and we are led to those who help us most to grow if we let them, and we help them in return.**

The song "For Good" from the musical *Wicked* touched just the right note for those gathered at Portland State University on July 28 to celebrate the life of Betty Roberts. Her dear friend Ann Aiken, chief judge of the US District Court for the District of Oregon, introduced the song, saying, "It is only through dedicating our lives to the lives of others that we can work for good in this world. The song dedicated for today's service was chosen by Betty herself. She chose it to send a message: That in reaching out to touch each of your lives, she ended up gaining so much more—you touched her life in return. And that is how you must keep living. Carry Betty's torch—light others' torches—it is her charge to all of us: Start a bonfire!"

As Portland State Vice Provost Melody Rose said, "So much of Betty's life was spent in public service that is widely known and deeply appreciated—these are the contributions that come readily to mind in recent tributes to this unique and talented woman. But some of her greatest accomplishments were rarely chronicled because they were performed quietly, and often without attribution."

For Oregon Women Lawyers, Betty Roberts's public accomplishments had great significance: as a prominent legislator, a savvy campaigner, Oregon's first female appellate judge, and an early advocate



Photo by Jodee Jackson

Continued on page 12

Anita Hill Speaks at OWLS Fall CLE

By Ellen Klem



Photo by Anna M. Campbell

The panel at the OWLS Fall CLE on October 14 (left to right):
Judge Adrienne Nelson, Professor Anita Hill, Diane Schwartz Sykes

In 1991, Anita Hill's courageous testimony during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings sparked a national conversation about sexual harassment and women's equality in politics and the workplace. Today, Anita Hill is a professor of social policy, law, and women's studies at Brandeis University. Her new book, *Reimagining Equality: Stories of Gender, Race, and Finding Home*, was published in October.

On October 14, OWLS welcomed Professor Hill to Portland to deliver an inspirational keynote address at the OWLS Fall CLE, held in downtown Portland and attended by nearly 300 people.

Before Professor Hill delivered her remarks, the Honorable Jill Tanner of the Oregon Tax Court presented the OWLS Katherine H. O'Neil Volunteer Service Award to Terri Kraemer. Terri was honored for her steadfast dedication and

Continued on page 14

Remembering Betty Roberts

continued from page 1

of alternative dispute resolution, Betty Roberts proved it could be done. Every bit as important, though, was her quiet work

behind the scenes, offering wise counsel, whether cautionary or encouraging, to Oregon Women Lawyers and the Oregon Women Lawyers Foundation, as well as her absolute embrace of all women lawyers and law students who hoped to work “for good.”

Of the hundreds of people who attended her memorial service and the thousands more who couldn’t be there but wanted to be, a great percentage counted her as a friend. Her genuine interest in the lives of others quickly transcended any barriers. Although she always had advice, she also readily sought the ideas of others. Her almost boundless energy and her desire to keep learning and growing kept her connected with a wide and varied circle of friends.

One of the areas in which she had the greatest influence was in getting more women on the bench, then encouraging and supporting them once they were there. Her help was hands-on and personal, whether it was public or behind the scenes: walking door to door with Marilyn Litzenberger to talk with voters in her successful 2002 campaign for the Multnomah County Circuit Court, asking former Gov. Mark Hatfield to keynote the Oregon Women Lawyers Foundation’s 2001 celebration of 40 consecutive years of women judges on the Oregon circuit court bench, or spending hours on the phone answering questions from attorneys interested in becoming judges. Portland attorney Kathryn Root recalls working with Betty Roberts and Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Mercedes Deiz in 1989 to organize OWLS’ first-ever “How to Become a Judge” seminar, thereby helping to demystify a process that was then not widely understood.

Up until Betty’s death, every woman who followed her on the Oregon appellate bench, from Susan Graber to Lynn Nakamoto, benefited from her practical and personal assistance. Ellen Rosenblum, senior judge of the Oregon Court



Among the women judges for whom Justice Betty Roberts (at far right) paved the way (from left): Justice Martha Walters, Judge Ellen Rosenblum, Judge Susan Graber, Chief Judge Mary Deits, Justice Virginia Linder, Judge Darleen Ortega, Justice Susan Leeson

of Appeals, has called her “the mother of Oregon women lawyers and judges and our mentor-in-chief.” Former Chief Judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals Mary Deits said that arguing cases before Judge Roberts showed her that a woman could be an appellate judge. When Mary Deits went on the bench herself, Betty Roberts was the first person to call to offer candid, blunt, humorous, and very useful advice.

According to Oregon Court of Appeals Judge Darleen Ortega, “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.”

In 2002, when Justice Susan Leeson worried that leaving the Oregon Supreme Court for health reasons might be seen as a betrayal to women, as she was the only woman on the court, just as Betty Roberts had been, she said that the question was always “WWBRD?—What Would Betty Roberts Do?” She phoned her and was told, “Quit, get well, and don’t ever look back!”

The very first woman lawyer whom Oregon Supreme Court Justice Virginia Linder ever met was Betty Roberts, then a gubernatorial candidate campaigning at Southern Oregon College. Later, when she was in law school, seeing Betty on the bench gave her an ecstatic moment of recognition: “It gave me my sense of place in the courtroom. I knew I could belong there.”

When Virginia Linder began doing appellate work for the Oregon Department of Justice, she didn’t have much money for an extensive wardrobe. She spent \$20 (a large sum for her at that time) on a green dress to wear for oral argument. Later, she attended a “Women in the Courtroom” conference, and one of the sessions discussed “proper dress” for women litigators. The advice offered

did not sit well with Betty, so when she gave the luncheon keynote, she threw out her prepared remarks and spoke about attitudes about women in the courtroom. “Now take Gini Linder’s green dress. That’s perfectly appropriate court wear.” It was the first time she realized that Betty had noticed her.

Virginia Linder later asked Betty for her support when she put her name in for the Oregon Court of Appeals, telling her she was a lesbian at the same time. Justice Linder says that when she decided to run for the Oregon Supreme Court, “Betty grabbed my hand and jumped out with me.”

Betty Roberts lived her life with purpose. She taught us how to live, and she taught us how to die. She acknowledged that pulmonary fibrosis was a fatal disease, but she was engaged in life until the very end. Whether we knew her as a symbol of women’s achievement, a role model, an inspiring speaker, a teacher, a friend, or a treasured confidante, each member of Oregon Women Lawyers can say, “Because I knew you I have been changed for good.”*

For more on the life of Betty Roberts, read her memoir, *With Grit and By Grace: Breaking Trails in Politics and Law* (Oregon State University Press, 2008) and her 2005 oral history, taken by OWLS’ founding president, Katherine O’Neil, available at www.americanbar.org/groups/senior_lawyers/pages/roberts.html. A video of her memorial service is at <http://echo360.pdx.edu/ess/echo/presentation/4c31ae1b-9a02-45ec-a06b-4d460e6850ae>.

* This quotation is from the song “For Good” from the musical *Wicked*, music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz.

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