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PUBLIC SERVICE A LIFESTYLE FOR KNOXVILLE MAYOR ROGERO

TAKE A LOOK around Furman's campus and it's clear there's no "typical Furman student." The student body is a mish-mash of ages, interests, ethnicities, accomplishments and goals.

But even among such a diversified group, Madeline Rogero was unique as a senior in 1979. "I was a bit of an older student. I had one child already, and one was on the way," she says. "My second child was just about three weeks old when I graduated."

That wasn't the only thing that made Rogero stand out. She had transferred to Furman after a year at Temple University and two years as a political science major at Ohio State. Before her senior year, however, she felt called to help California's farm aides — which led to a four-year hiatus from higher education, during which she worked with Cesar Chavez to help farm workers improve their living and working conditions.

Today, as mayor of Knoxville — the first woman to serve as mayor of any of Tennessee's four largest cities (including Memphis, Nashville and Chattanooga) — Rogero says those kinds of experiences shaped her view not only of public service, but of what it means to be a contributing member of a community. She jumped head-first into improving Knoxville as soon as she moved there more than 30 years ago.

"I got my start in politics as a county commissioner. I cared about neighborhood issues," she says. "I ran for mayor because I wanted to continue the work that I had been doing — dealing with blighted properties, strengthening our communities, and actively supporting sustainability issues."

During the past three decades Rogero has served on numerous boards, including the Knoxville Transportation Authority, Partnership for Neighborhood Improvement, and the Mental Health Association of Knox County. Her efforts have earned her many accolades, including the 2003 Knoxvillian of the Year award.

Rogero has a long history of working to revitalize areas that have fallen into disrepair. After losing a close mayoral race in 2003 to Bill Haslam — now the state's governor — Rogero joined his administration as community development director. The Office of Neighborhoods, launched under her leadership, was instrumental in completing a \$25.6 million program that helped secure tax credits, grants and bonds for businesses in economically depressed parts of the city.

Rogero and her staff also spent countless hours on commercial redevelopment, historic preservation, property redemption, and services that enhanced the community's economy. She spearheaded a five-county collaboration that garnered a \$4.3 million grant to support sustainable community planning.

Even before taking the job with the city, though, Rogero pushed to improve her community. Among other responsibilities, she consulted with Capital One Financial Corporation's community affairs office and was executive director of Knoxville's Promise, an organization devoted to giving youths the resources they need to become successful adults.

As mayor, Rogero is focused on redeveloping Knoxville's south waterfront and working with a local foundation to support 10 city parks, as well as hiking and biking trails.

Although she spent only a year at Furman, she credits her time there with helping her learn to translate her real-world, outside-the-box experiences into effective civic endeavors. She points to classes with professors Jim Guth and Don Aiesi as forums where she came to understand the value of her work with Chavez.

"I remember they would often call on me during political science and constitutional law discussions because I had a lot of real and practical experience to bring to those conversations," she said. "They knew I had a different point of view."

From a young age, Rogero says, she felt she would become involved in causes greater than herself.

"The nuns and priests [in her Catholic schools] challenged us to be involved," she says. "A lot of different things were happening in the '60s — the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War. That education opened my mind beyond my personal experiences and really instilled in me a sense of working for the world to be more equitable, inclusive and diverse."

Rogero also learned firsthand the importance of helping others during her childhood in Florida. At any given time, foster children or other family members lived in her house. Seeing her parents open their lives to those in need taught her to reach out to others whenever she could.



DAVID LUTTRELL

That time with family also nurtured Rogero's love of nature. Her father, she says, loved to hunt and fish, and they spent a great deal of time at the beach or on the river.

Her affinity for the outdoors has never faded. Rogero and her husband, Gene Monaco, often bike around Knoxville's greenways or use their flatwater kayaks to paddle down the Tennessee River. Her greatest outdoor adventure, however, is being a beekeeper.

"As a family, we suit up in the gear with the veil and the gloves, and we share the honey the bees make with friends and family," says Rogero, a mother and grandmother of two and stepmother of three. "It's a really amazing thing to get into when you realize that one-third of the things we eat depend on honeybees for pollination. It's really helped me to learn about and appreciate the ecosystem we live in."

— WHITNEY JACKSON HOWELL

The author, a 2000 graduate, is a freelance writer in Durham, N.C.