
Volume 15
Number 2
Oregon Reads: One State, Many Stories
(Summer 2009)

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, B., & Wells, G. (2014). Oregon's Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment: Excerpts from With Grit and By Grace. *OLA Quarterly*, 15(2), 2-4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1240>

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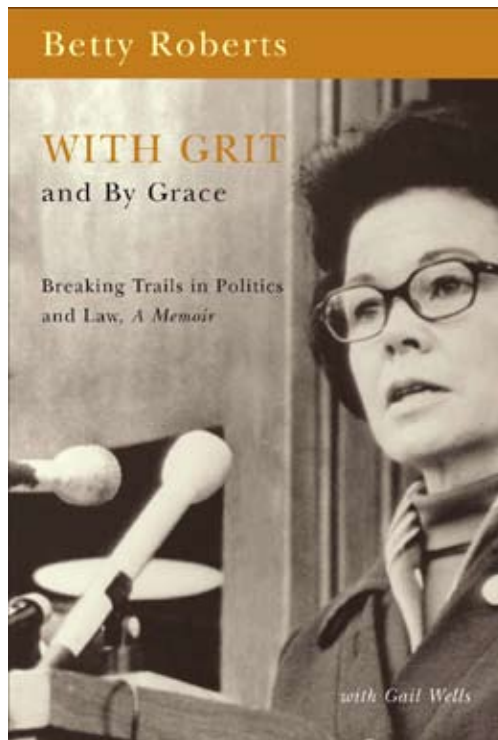
OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Oregon's Passage of the Equal Rights Amendment:

Excerpts from *With Grit and By Grace*

by Betty Roberts
with Gail Wells

(Permission granted to reprint by Oregon State University Press, <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/press>. Betty Roberts was the keynote speaker at the 2009 OLA Annual Conference.)



Soon after opening day Norma Paulus came to my desk on the Senate floor and said, “Betty, we women in the House think we need to form a women’s caucus to talk about getting the ERA passed. Since you’re the senior woman in the Senate I think you should call and chair the meeting.” I hadn’t thought of that, but it made sense. I wouldn’t presume to organize the women in the House, although there was no question in my mind that most of them would work for the ERA, as Betty Browne and I would in the Senate. But Norma’s proposal gave me permission to reach out to them. I called the meeting for late one afternoon in my third-floor committee room.

What a gathering! The incumbent House members, Norma Paulus, Mary Reike, Nancie Fadeley, and Grace Peck, along with Senators Betty Browne and myself, had already proven ourselves effective legislators. Freshmen Representatives Vera

Katz and Mary Burrows were quickly making their mark. Representatives Mary Roberts, Peg Dereli, and Pat Whiting rounded out our caucus. We were a diverse group of Republicans and Democrats ranging in age from thirty to seventy-five, lawyers and housewives, office workers, social workers and union workers, most married but some not, with children from pre-school age to grown and out on their own. The convergence of these women in my committee room was no accident. Every one of us had spirit and a common purpose. We were all warriors. For me, it seemed the cavalry had finally arrived . . .

The final hurdle for the ERA was passage in the House. The House floor debate took place on February 8, 1973, only a week after the Senate vote.

Representative Nancie Fadeley spoke first. She painted a compelling picture of what the ERA would mean to ordinary human beings, black and white, male and female, on a day-to-day basis. She spoke of women in poverty who had children to raise, who had to do lower-status work because they lacked opportunities, who had to settle for lower pay than men.

Representative Bernard Byers, a Democrat from Lebanon, a small town south of Salem, opposed ratification because he believed it wasn’t needed. Women already had laws on equal pay for equal work and other laws could be passed if they were necessary. So there! Short, but not so sweet.

Representative Norma Paulus made a forceful plea:

I believe I can separate the Equal Rights Amendment from the Women’s Movement for those of you who feel uncomfortable about certain aspects of the Women’s Movement. . . . The Women’s Movement purports to change attitudes—I support that movement, wholeheartedly. It seeks to change the attitudes, social attitudes



between men and women. But that's not what the Equal Rights Amendment does. The Equal Rights Amendment seeks to change the government's attitude toward women. Today, I don't care what you men really think of me or what your attitude toward me is, but I do care what the government thinks of me and what its attitude is toward me.

Norma went on in her own unique style to point out that the U.S. Supreme Court had always recognized white males as persons—picking out a good-looking male representative to illustrate her point—but that it had only recently recognized race as a protected status under the law. Here she mentioned Bill McCoy, the only African American representative to have served in the Oregon Legislature; the Court had finally recognized him as a person, but only after “it smelled smoke from the courthouse burning.” The Court, she said, had yet to recognize women as persons. “I know I am a person,” she said. “You know I am a person. And it is about time the United States Supreme Court knew it.”

Vera Katz then had her say. She gave examples of sex discrimination in the “progressive State of Oregon,” pointing out that, because of their sex, women may be barred from renting apartments, buying homes, or receiving loans. They may be denied entrance to vocational or training schools and prohibited from entering public accommodations. There has been an extraordinary change in America, Vera continued, marked by a new surge of idealism and a new insistence on reality in our democratic order. But more must be done, because women are demanding it, and “because, by any moral standard, it is right.”

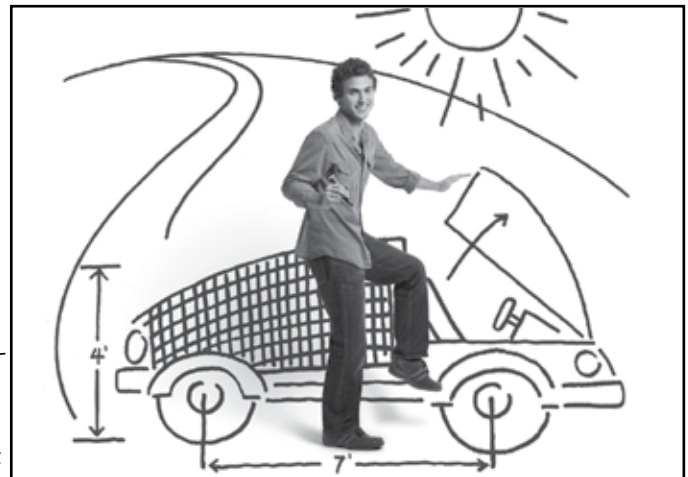
Opposition then came from Paul Han-neman, a Republican from the coastal town of Cloverdale, where he said he saw men

and women working “side by side on the farms, women working in the barns carrying almost as heavy milking machines as the men.” That didn't seem unfair to him.

Majority Leader Les AuCoin, a Democrat from Forest Grove just south of Portland, was the first man to speak in favor:

[T]he question before us is simply this: Do we have the will to guarantee the full rights of citizenship to both men and women? ... In ratifying this amendment, we are not saying that one role in life is superior or inferior to another. Instead we are insuring that each individual has the full opportunity to be what he or she wants to be and then leaving it up to the person's ability, not the happenstance of one's sex, to determine if his or her aspirations will be met.

Yay, Les! He was followed by Representative Roger Martin, a Republican from Lake Oswego, a suburb of Portland, also a proponent. Roger had drawn latrine duty, so I could sympathize with him. To fulfill his obligation, he'd informally surveyed four of the major oil companies that did business in Oregon. Did they plan to change the restrooms in their service stations should the ERA become a part of the Constitution? After he convinced them he was seri-



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ous, they replied that the service stations were there to serve the public, and that the public would continue to want separate facilities. However, Roger continued, one of the managers pointed out that some of the rural communities have only one restroom. “When I stopped to think about it,” Roger said, “I realized that he was right. This has been historical; usually they have not been differentiated between men and women, but between one-holders or two-holders.”

Good argument, Roger. I wished I’d thought of that.


The speeches were getting shorter as the noon hour approached. Representative Gordon Macpherson, a Republican from the Newport area, didn’t exactly endear himself to the women when he said he would join the “girls” in voting for the resolution, and that he had just heard “the two finest speeches made on the floor of this house by women.” But it was easy to forgive his faux pas in exchange for his vote.

Other legislators, all favoring the ERA, spoke in quick succession—Keith Skelton, Mary Rieke, Wally Priestley and Howard Willits, who pointed out that Oregon hadn’t even ratified the Fourteenth Amendment yet, and that we should do that and ratify the ERA, too.

Finally, Nancie Fadeley made her brief closing remarks. She spoke of the Oregon pioneer suffragist Abigail Scott Duniway, who was turned away when she tried to vote in 1870. Duniway then worked dili-

gently to get the vote for women and was finally successful in 1912, almost a decade before women nationally could vote.

The roll was called. The vote was fifty “Ayes,” nine “Nays,” with one person excused. An overwhelming victory.

While we had wanted to be the first state to ratify in 1973, two other western states beat us to the punch—Wyoming and South Dakota. Oregon was number twenty-five to ratify the ERA. We’d done it. There would be similar battles in other legislatures. In Oregon it was a sweet victory. 

The Authors

Betty Roberts served in the Oregon Legislature beginning in 1965. She was appointed in 1977 as Judge of the Oregon Court of Appeals and in 1981 to the Oregon Supreme Court. After her retirement from the Oregon Supreme Court in 1986, Betty Roberts began a new career in mediation and arbitration, and made international headlines in March 2004 when she performed the state’s first same-sex marriage ceremonies in Multnomah County.

Gail Wells is the author of several books, including *The Little Lucky: A Family Geography* and *The Tillamook: A Created Forest Comes of Age* (both OSU Press.) She is an independent writer and editor specializing in natural resource and historical topics.

