



2006 Margaret Brent Awards

Betty Roberts

Betty Roberts' childhood in Texas was one of hard times exacerbated by the Great Depression. Her mother supported a disabled husband and her children by taking in washing until the New Deal's WPA program provided work. Justice Roberts learned from her mother that adversity can be overcome with hard work. She graduated from high school, spent one year at Texas Wesleyan College in Ft. Worth, and supported herself by working to pay her tuition and expenses. She then married.

In Oregon in the 1950s, Justice Roberts felt restless in her role as mother and banker's wife. While raising four children, she signed up for college courses. She graduated from Portland State University in 1958 and taught high school. By 1962, she had a Master's Degree in political science from the University of Oregon but had not yet satisfied her education objectives. She enrolled in the night program at Northwestern School of Law at Lewis and Clark College, continued to teach, and was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives.

By 1996, Justice Roberts, a single parent, graduated from law—the same year one daughter graduated from Stanford University, a son from high school, another son from eighth grade, with the youngest daughter in high school cheering them all. Justice Roberts married a lawyer and legislative colleague in 1968 and established a successful legal practice with him. She then ran for State Senate, becoming the lone woman in the Oregon Senate.

By 1973, more women had joined Justice Roberts in the Oregon Legislature. They organized a bipartisan women's caucus, which succeeded in passing legislation that significantly enhanced the rights of women in Oregon. In 1974, she ran a strong statewide campaign for Governor and was narrowly defeated in the primary. Then the Democratic Party named her to fill a vacancy on the ballot for the general election against U.S. Senator Bob Packwood. Again it was a narrow defeat. The Oregon Women's Political Caucus named her the 1975 "Woman

of the Year" for setting a precedent for other women to run for statewide office. She continued to work in the legislature on behalf of education, environmental and consumer legislation, and women's issues.

In 1977, Governor Straub, a Democrat, appointed her to the Oregon Court of Appeals as the first woman to serve on that court. In 1982, she was appointed by Republican Governor Atiyeh as the first woman to serve on the Oregon Supreme Court. According to a woman justice who later served on the Supreme Court, "I can attest to the fact that her legacy remains a positive force on the court."

After taking senior judge status, she helped found Women's Investment Network-PAC to recruit and support women to run for the Legislature, and helped found Oregon Women Lawyers to promote women and minorities in the profession. Justice Roberts pioneered alternative dispute resolution in Oregon and continues to contribute to the legal profession with her highly successful mediation and arbitration work.

Justice Roberts is the recipient of numerous awards including the Distinguished Service Award from the Mary Leonard Law Society and Marion County Bar Association (1986), the Oregon State Bar Association's Award of Merit (1987), and the Oregon Women Lawyers' Betty Roberts Award created to recognize lawyers who promote women in the profession (1992).

Colleagues say of Justice Roberts: "She continues to be the person to whom many of us choose to turn for career support and advice. Her keen understanding of the political and legal system and her national network of support have made her a unique advisor among women. She has worked tirelessly to encourage other women to become judges."