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# A Montana Treasure - Tribute to Arlyne Reichert

Mary Sheehy Moe

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## **A Montana Treasure**

Tribute to Arlyne Reichert – October 26, 2016

There is a certain serendipity that colors the life of Arlyne Reichert, and it can be found even in today's celebration. When the Athenas gathered last summer and chose Arlyne for this year's award, we chose her because she has always been a woman teeming with good ideas for making some little spot of the world a better place, and she has unique qualities that, time and time again, have turned those good ideas into realities. The milieu for a person with ideas to get things done is politics, and Arlyne has engaged in the political arena for over half a century now. Yet when we chose her, we weren't really thinking about politics.

How serendipitous then that we give this award today, as we all fortify ourselves for the last two weeks of what is arguably the ugliest political season any of us has witnessed. Because Arlyne's story is the story of politics as it can be and ought to be and, if we are wise and insistent and lucky, may one day be again.

At the heart of the ideal politician are three qualities: a ravenous intellect, a deep empathy, and a passion for engagement. Arlyne has always had all three. But she might have just been a very good nurse, had she not laid eyes on the Gary Cooper good looks of Rick Reichert in 1942. Her nursing studies at the University of Buffalo went out the window. They got married in 1945 and moved to Great Falls, and although Arlyne wanted to continue her nursing education, neither hospital would admit married women into their training programs at that time.

But you know Arlyne: She was not idle. While raising her large family, she was active in her church and her community. She became very active with the League of Woman Voters, a tremendously influential political advocacy group in the 1960s. And she got bit by the political bug. By 1970, she decided to go for it. She threw her hat into the ring for a legislative seat. She went door-to-door day after day, distributing 3 X 5 cards with her favorite recipe for "Chicken Delight" on them. She put up yard signs. She called the radio shows. And she lost.

Elections were different then: you didn't choose between two candidates in your district. You voted for a candidate in your county, and the top vote-getters county-wide got in. In Cascade County, the top 12 got in. Arlyne came in 13<sup>th</sup>. But remember that serendipity? The voters in that election also approved a referendum for a Constitutional Convention and the Montana Supreme Court subsequently ruled that no person holding public office could run as a delegate for the Convention. So those 12 people who had beaten Arlyne in 1970 couldn't run against her in 1971 to be delegates.

And Arlyne hadn't just stayed home and moped after getting beaten. She had talked a local TV station into having her provide "on the spot" coverage of the session and featuring her in a weekly program on the legislature. So when the election came for the Con-Con, as it was called, she had a face and name that was very familiar to folks in Cascade

County. She came in second this time. She was on her way to Helena to participate in a truly historic event: the writing of a new constitution for the Treasure State.

In the political history of this state, the Constitutional Convention of 1972 is Camelot. It was a time of great idealism, a time of new awakenings, a time when women wanted leadership roles – and the delegates rose to the occasion. Wary of the influence of lobbyists, they didn't allow them on the floor. Mindful of the walls that partisan politics create, they didn't sit in party blocks. They sat alphabetically, Democrat next to Republican, preacher next to farmer, Catholic next to agnostic, and a 46-year-old widow named Arlyne Reichert next to a 24-year-old widow named Mae Nan Robinson. Forced to reach beyond labels and encouraged to form the natural friendships that neighbors have, delegates really listened to one another, came to know and respect one another, and got something really amazing done in the process.

Arlyne flourished in that environment. When you read the transcripts of their deliberations, you can almost see Arlyne's brain racing, her earnest eyes not missing a thing, her gracious smile encouraging even the speakers she didn't agree with. And all the qualities that we have seen in Arlyne's subsequent work here in Great Falls were much in evidence in that Camelot moment.

Her keen intelligence, for example: Arlyne had clearly read everything she could get her hands on and listened to every word of testimony – and, she remembered it all! She could quote a Denver judge verbatim, recall the 21 amendments to Hawaii's constitution, and quote from this authority or that till the cows came home.

After reading the transcripts, I asked her seatmate Mae Nan whether Arlyne's desk was just cluttered with books and transcripts because she was always referring to something or quoting someone and Mae Nan said, "No! Her desk was never messy. Most days, there wasn't much on it. But she had such amazing recall. I was just in awe of her."

Arlyne was quick on her feet: When one delegate assured her that the legislature had always recorded votes on second reading, she pored over her notes from the last session, the one she had watched as a TV personality, and rose a few minutes later to give some statistics that showed that actually recording votes on second reading was not very common at all. And this was before Google!

She was articulate and gracious. Mae Nan said, "When Arlyne rose to speak, she was so poised and so polished – tall, stately, not a hair out of place – and she always spoke with a smile. She had such a commanding presence that the whole delegation was just enrapt in attention."

Elegant in appearance, she nonetheless had an ear for the colloquial. When the delegates debated whether the legislature itself should handle the re-apportioning of legislative districts, she cautioned, "They know each other too well. They'll never be able to do it." It would be "like removing your own appendix."

All the things that have been touchstones in Arlyne's activism in Great Falls can be found in the issues she supported at the convention. Nobody should be surprised about her work to preserve the 10<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge or the McLaughlin Research Institute. She signed a petition at the Con-Con to encourage the acquisition of historic, scenic, and scientific treasures. All she's done to support our library and public schools echoes her work during the convention. She was then and is now a staunch supporter of equal opportunities for young people, accommodations for disabled veterans, and recognition of the cultural integrity of American Indians.

But her big thing at the Con-Con was a unicameral legislature. That was her baby. She nursed it through the committee process and she taught it how to walk on the floor of the convention. Because of all she knew and all she could articulate about the issue, she had the votes she needed to make it the majority position of the committee and because of the respect she garnered throughout the convention, she had the votes she needed to get it into the constitution that Montanans would ratify the following June.

But she didn't. Her sense of fairness made her support the proposition that the voters be allowed to choose which system to have – the bicameral one they were used to or the unicameral one the majority of her committee believed was the better course.

Not only that, her sense of pragmatism led her to accept the fact that the constitution the voters ratified would include the bicameral language. She admitted that she "almost choked on the words," but she didn't want all the work that the delegates had done to go down the drain because of the bicameral/unicameral issue alone.

She didn't let it go at that, though. On the last day of the convention, she rose to ask that the delegates express their own support of a unicameral legislature so that voters would know that, at the end of their study and deliberations, their elected delegates had concluded that a unicameral legislature was the better alternative. You can tell from the transcripts that Chairman Graybill was not too keen on this vote, but Arlyne wasn't going to leave her baby out in the cold. Or if she was, she was going to make sure that baby had a nice, warm jacket. On the very last substantive vote the delegates took before the new constitution was approved, the majority of those voting supported Arlyne Reichert's unicameral approach.

In June, Montana's voters ratified the constitution. Unfortunately, they did not approve the unicameral provision. But Arlyne knew then and knows now that she and 99 other Montanans, working for a mere 56 days, created a document for the ages. Montana's 1972 constitution has been praised as ground-breaking in its eloquence, its vision, and its simplicity. It gives Montanans a spectrum of rights unknown in other states. It has been amended fewer times than any modern state constitution and, in fact, fewer times than all but one state constitution, period.

Many years have passed since those Camelot days of the Constitutional Convention. Most of her fellow delegates no longer walk this beautiful land. Thanks to Arlyne, the remaining few continue to meet once a year to renew old friendships in the spirit of that

verse from Camelot – “Don’t let it be forgot – that once there was a spot – for happily-ever-aftering ...”

We Athenas instituted the “We Stand Tall” Award to say the same thing. Don’t ever forget that there are women in our midst who stood tall – who found a passion and pursued it – who used their wits to achieve great things – and Arlyne Reichert is one of those women. She is, as reporter Chuck Johnson noted, a Montana treasure. And so, as with the legend of Camelot, we hope future generations will tell her story in legendary style:

There was a woman once - lovely, head to soul  
She carried ideas with her like some bowl of fruit she meant to share,  
And wrapped herself in graciousness like a stole.  
She was the epitome of elegance - no regal queen, but a majesty  
That faced triumph without a blush and tragedy without a shudder.  
We’ve never known a queen. We’ll never need another.

Yes, there was a woman - lovely, head to soul.  
Whatever heartaches haunted her, she made whole  
A thousand piecemeal dreams she took on loan.  
We knew that woman once. She helped us find our own.

Please join me in congratulating, Montana’s treasure, our hometown heroine, Arlyne Reichert.

Mary Sheehy Moe