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Dorothy Eck – Building Bridges Not Playing Bridge

Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

September 7, 2015

Bozeman's Dorothy Eck, 91, is the Grand Dame of Montana government and politics who is being recognized and honored at a dinner September 11. Over the years I have been privileged to work with Dorothy as a leader of the Montana League of Women Voters, a Constitutional Convention delegate & officer, and a 20-year State Senator. Dorothy Eck has been a mentor for many and an inspiration to us all -- testimony that one person can really make a difference.

When Dorothy & husband Hugo Eck moved to Bozeman in 1946, the young 22 year-old "faculty wife," wondered how to fit in. Dorothy told me last year: "as [wife of] a new faculty member, women came to call ... and I was invited to join their groups ... mostly [to play] bridge. I think I went to one bridge party to satisfy them ... after that they decided they didn't really want me participating [as] I was opinionated ... interested in issues and not really in the social life."

So, the young Dorothy Eck moved rapidly from "playing bridge" to "building bridges" in ways that made her community, state and world better. As she got active in the Girl Scouts and the Methodist Church, the public first issue to benefit from her interest and energy was the United Nations. Dorothy supported the creation of the U.N. as a way to "try to end wars," and joined the Bozeman U.N. Association to build peace bridges. She found herself a Democrat partially because of the staunch opposition to the U.N. by so many Gallatin Valley Republicans.

Later active in the League of Women Voters, Dorothy was selected to be State President when the incoming State President couldn't serve. Under her leadership the League successfully helped pass Montana's first minimum wage law, promoted reorganization of the dysfunctional executive branch of state government and fought for a Constitutional Convention to write a new Constitution for Montana. She built bridges - between liberals and conservatives, urban and rural -- that helped lobby the Convention Call through the Legislature, and secured a positive vote by the people. Dorothy then ran for and won a Convention delegate seat along with eighteen other women -- shattering the glass ceiling that had effectively limited women in elected office in Montana. Dorothy was selected as a Vice President of the Convention where she built bridges among all delegates as she helped craft our superb "Declaration of Rights," and championed open government, the public's right-to-know and "Indian Education for All." Dorothy then helped promote and secure ratification of the new Constitution.

Dorothy helped implement the new Constitution by building bridges with legislators of all stripes to insure that the meaning of Constitutional advances were not weakened by legislative action. She joined the administration of newly-elected Governor Tom Judge, as state-local government coordinator, from where she built bridges to local governments across Montana as they struggled to implement Constitutional changes.

Moving from administration to shaping policy, Dorothy successfully ran for the Montana Senate in 1980, serving for 20 years before she was “term-limited” out in 2000. As a State Senator she fought to keep Montana taxes fair, continued to advocate for open government, helped control money in politics, and raised taxes on cigarettes to pay for Montana children’s health care. Always the bridge-builder, she worked with anyone and everyone to advance the causes for which she fought.

Dorothy was and is firm as steel in her beliefs, tenacious in pursuing her goals, but always persuasive with a great command of the facts. And there is always that good sense of humor and that twinkle in her eye.

People like Dorothy Eck do not come around every day, so it is appropriate that we see her honored and recognized again. But the best way we can honor Dorothy and folks like her, is to emulate them by committing ourselves to serving others, both privately and publically and helping build the bridge to a better Montana for our children and grandchildren.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte thinking about that Grand Dame of Montana government and politics who inspires us all to this day.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.