

Miriam Preston Block

A Democratic Heroine

Miriam Preston Block was a loyal and outstanding Democrat during a long and active political life. Although her widely known political achievements were primarily the result of her five terms on the non-partisan Raleigh City Council, and her election and re-election to it came from the Democratic base, her political influence extended far beyond her service in office.

Much of her participation in Democratic politics was behind the scenes. Although she enthusiastically supported the non-partisan nature of the Raleigh City Council, she had no problem in switching roles when it came to Democratic politics. For her, issues and people coming before the Raleigh City Council were neither Democrat nor Republican, but all other levels of government should be influenced by the Democratic Party. At the Council table she was guided by her Democratic principles, but away from the table she also openly promoted the Democratic Party.

Miriam's Democratic activities included:

1. Precinct committee member
2. Precinct chair
3. Charter member of the Democratic Women of Wake County
4. Charter member of the Eleanor Roosevelt Club
5. Delegate to county and district conventions and to the 1988 National Democratic Convention.
6. Strong, consistent supporter of Democratic candidates with time, money, advice, and endorsements.
7. Recruiter and mentor to Democratic candidates, especially women.

Miriam's entry into Democratic politics began when her husband Bill was a graduate student at the University of Illinois and they attended the Methodist Church in Urbana. The minister not only advocated Republican policies but also advised the congregation that as good Methodists they should vote the straight Republican ticket. Miriam wrote him a two-page letter, stressing that he should not take sides in politics, as well as informing him of the benefits of the Democratic point of view.

During the late 60's and early 70's, she came out in opposition to the Vietnam War, all the while asserting her duty to speak out as a Democrat. She then backed candidates who were consistent with her beliefs, putting out their yard signs (then a relatively new campaign tool) and standing at the polls for them. As became her practice, her monetary contributions were few, but sizable.

During the Vietnam War her precinct was split on support for the war, but the chairman reported a unanimous vote for the war. Miriam successfully challenged him on the issue. As was typical of their approach as Democrats, they remained friends.

Miriam was a strong advocate for a true participatory democracy, and thus became a strong supporter for Raleigh's Citizens Advisory Councils. She stressed the importance of these meetings as a true opportunity for citizens to become informed participants in their municipal government.

Following her election to the city council as the first successful woman in its 23 year history, she became an advisor and mentor to other aspiring women candidates as well as a few carefully selected men. She actively campaigned for Democratic candidates with whom she agreed, but would not back candidates with whom she disagreed. Her endorsement was a true commitment on her part.

During the 70's, 80's, 90's, and into the 21st century, Miriam went to the polls for every election. In both primary and general elections, she stood with a sign and greeted people. She said that "you'll never know how many people's votes you'll change, but it's important to show the flag." In 2004, with failing health and an arthritic knee, she still took her place for a while at her precinct. She also continued to make calls for her candidates as long as she was physically able.

Although Miriam Preston Block's many accomplishments on the Raleigh City Council were under a non-partisan label, her advocacy for neighborhood protection, environmental protection [particularly our water supply watershed and our parks], open government, employee benefits and protection, and fiscal accountability provisions were more clearly identified with the Democratic Party than with its opposing party. On key issues, she often brought together bi-partisan support to get the issue passed.

Always the fiscal conservative, she consistently looked for the benefits to the neighborhoods and ordinary working citizens in all major city projects. Even with her declining health, she joined the then district councilor and one of her former allies on council to meet with key city staff looking for the real numbers on the new convention center. That was also her hallmark during her five terms on the Raleigh City Council, always looking for the actual cost/ benefit for the average taxpayer, always looking for the hidden numbers, and always looking for the true benefits for the neighborhoods.

Miriam Block was a true innovator in numerous areas of government, and used her Democratic clout at all levels of government. When Athens Drive High School was built, she engineered the only school-park-public library partnership in existence in Wake County, setting a precedent for future school-park partnerships and maximizing the benefits of public funds. Miriam also worked with the Democratic leadership in the General Assembly to get the State of NC to pay an annual sum to the City of Raleigh for fire protection and trash collection. In addition, she spoke before a legislative committee on legislation to remove phosphates from detergents, promoting both the benefits to our environment as well as the cost-savings for our wastewater treatment facility.

During Miriam Block's long political life, she was both a "small d democrat and a Big D Democrat". She saw them as totally compatible and that helped make her an outstanding Democrat and practitioner of the American democracy.

Compiled by Benson Kirkman, Pete Leary, Bill Block, Cherry Block, and Christy Block

Additional personal thoughts

"Miriam Block was, and still is, my mentor as a woman working for Raleigh and as a Democrat working for the good of everyone who lives in Raleigh. While leading our small group of citizens through an update of the West/Southwest Raleigh Comprehensive Plan in 1978-79, she taught us how to think in terms of what would be best for everyone in our part of the city. I constantly was

amazed at her knowledge of government issues. She seemed to sense my love of learning new things and invited me to attend a meeting of the Democratic Women of Wake County (she knew I was a Democrat through and through). At that meeting I listened to three strong Democratic women who described how women could forge ahead and make positive contributions in their homes, work and government. With the words of those women (which were personified in Miriam) always running through my mind, I have always tried to do in and for my community as I think Miriam would do if she were in my place.

"To me, Miriam Block stands head and shoulders above all other politicians I have ever known. She represented in everything she did what the Democratic Party and all of us who are Democrats should be. She was the best of the best and I was so very proud to call her my friend." *Mary Belle Pate*

"My first contact with Miriam was through her husband, Bill, while he was chair of the NCSU Politics Department. As a mentor, he invited me to participate in the West Citizens Advisory Council where I met Miriam. As our friendship grew, and I became one of her admirers, I quickly learned of our shared values as well as her broad knowledge. One of the strongest of our ties was through our shared belief in the importance of the CAC system as a working example of a true participatory democracy.

"Later, when the Lake Johnson Park Master Plan was to be updated, Miriam used her political clout as a former councilor to have me appointed as chair of the Lake Johnson Master Plan Committee, even though I was not a member of the Parks, Recreation and Greenway Advisory Board at the time. I, in turn, made sure that she was appointed as a member of the Master Plan Committee, and she was one of our most thoughtful members. Much later, she became an adamant supporter of my efforts to update the Park Master Plan Process to include broader public participation and stronger environmental stewardship.

,"As I look back, I see many recurring themes in our work together, including: Fiscal responsibility, the responsibility of every citizen to be an active participant, the value of our parks and open space in building infrastructure for strong neighborhoods, and the wise management of our watersheds."
Benson Kirkman

"I first met Miriam Block in 1972 when I lived on Granite Street in southwest Raleigh. She introduced me to citizen politics and the Citizens Advisory Council when apartments were going in across the street from my single-family home. I worked with Miriam to change the zoning of 500+ acres to preserve our single family home neighborhoods. That is still the largest downzoning case in Raleigh's history. I went on to be Southwest CAC chair, and worked with Miriam to clean up cemeteries, playgrounds and improve city services in southwest Raleigh.

"When I became chair of the Raleigh CAC, I worked with Miriam to adopt the Raleigh Bikeway Plan, the first Raleigh Comprehensive Plan and the Raleigh Greenway Plan.

"When CP&L discontinued subsidizing City Coach Lines and Raleigh was asked to replace the subsidy, Miriam and the RCAC worked together to create the Raleigh Transit Authority. 'If the

taxpayers were to pay for it, the taxpayers should have a say in the operation of it.' Miriam later nominated me to the Raleigh Transit Authority.

"I am a proud founding member of the Wake Democratic Men's Club, and Miriam Block started it all, and I am still at it.

"Miriam did much of her politicking on the phone. She could match any of today's Yahoo groups for activating citizen response. Whether it was rallying support for an issue or a candidate for office, she could deliver District D in the city of Raleigh, NC. She always had an encouraging word for others and me. I credit Miriam Block with my sense of giving back." *Pete Leary*