

My Two Moms – My Democratic Heroes

In my cards and letters I call her Aunt Polly. In my heart, she's my 'other mother'. In my life, she's an inspiration as a Democrat. She's the middle of three daughters born to Edgar and Edith Heermance. My mother, Edith, was the eldest; Georgiana the youngest.

"The Heermance girls", as they were called in town, grew up on a farm near Charlottesville, Virginia during the Great Depression. They were, as the saying goes, "Roosevelt-era Democrats". The farm was near railroad tracks, so unemployed men frequently knocked on the door, asking to do chores in exchange for a sandwich or a bowl of soup. My grandfather never turned away a hungry man. School had taught them of the deprivations in Europe that followed WWI, but the idea of hungry, out of work Americans was appalling. Even in their home a family discussion could be "shall we kill the chicken for dinner, or wait until morning for another egg?"

Edith attended Longwood College and University of Virginia and went on to teach in rural southwest Virginia (excuse the redundancy). A divorce and an infant son (me) brought her back to Charlottesville. A deep appreciation of education led to activism in PTAs, the glass ceiling of her secretarial role led to activism in BPWs. In the early 1960s segregation was looming in the south bringing with it "massive resistance" and private schools. Under pressure to diversify its School Board, the City of Charlottesville appointed Edith Rudy to a position expecting an acquiescing member. Instead, they got a pro-integration activist and I attended the first integrated high school in Virginia.

Polly, was almost like an older sister to me. Where my mother worked in the system, Polly challenged it. In a favorite story, a disabled person needed public assistance and services but couldn't navigate the system. When Polly, then in her 60s, tried to help she was rebuffed by the County Commission. That is until she went to the Chairman's office one morning with a small cooler of food and drinks, a toothbrush, and a blanket and pillow and announced she wasn't leaving until she saw the Chairman and could deliver the needed services to the person. About 4 o'clock, when she started to make a pallet on the floor to spend the night, she was shown into the Chairman's chambers and left with assurances that the proper doors would be opened for her – and indeed they were.

After 60 years each of activism in the Democratic Party, countless canvassing calls, candidate tea parties, and poll work, their health slipped. When all they could do was make phone calls, they regretted only that they couldn't work the polls in person. My mother died on November 12, 2002. If she'd had the breath to do it, she'd have been recruiting voters from her ICU hospital bed. Polly, now nearing 90 still telephones her contemporaries at election time to remind them to vote Democratic. These women are my Democratic heroes.

Submitted by Richard Rudy