

## BETSY JOHNSON

### State Senator

Columbia, Clatsop, Portions of Tillamook,  
Washington, and Multnomah Counties



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There's a phrase that has become increasingly popular. You see it in ads, on T-shirts. Right now it's a window at Pioneer Place in Portland. The phrase is "No grit, no pearl."

It's a reminder that you need to experience something rough if you want to grow and evolve.

Norma Paulus encountered grit at an early age. What a pearl she became.

I can't read about Norma's dad and mother, packing their kids and belongings into a truck to escape Nebraska and the Dust Bowl, without thinking about John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." Her parents and siblings actually lived that.

Eventually they landed in Burns in the wide-open spaces of Harney County. Even today there are some folks, comfortably situated west of the Cascades, who dismiss Harney County as the kind of place where the cows kiss each other goodnight. Those folks have either never been to Harney County, or they arrived with so many preconceived notions they might as well have stayed home.

Norma could have shown them how to bloom where you are planted. She bloomed surrounded by sagebrush and rattlesnakes. She bloomed in a town where there were two classes of people – the poor and the less poor.

Every opportunity that came her way, she grabbed. Norma was mentored by men. This would inform her approach to feminism as a legislator. Men were not the enemy. Men can be your allies.

When she was a high school senior, Harney County District Attorney Leland Duncan offered her a part-time job as a secretary. How many high school seniors accompany a DA to autopsies to take notes? How many high school seniors learn the intricacies of probate law?

After graduating at the top of her senior class, Norma went to work full-time for DA Duncan. Every attorney she met was impressed with her intelligence and maturity. They encouraged her to think beyond Burns. By the time she was 23, she was personal secretary to Earl Latourette, the chief justice of the Oregon Supreme Court. He quickly saw her potential. He showed her a law on the books that would allow her to attend law school, even though she had no college degree. She would have to pass a challenge exam first. She did and went on to graduate with honors from Willamette University Law School. From there, she plunged into community service work, attracting more mentors along the way who would encourage her to run for office.

My father, Sam Johnson, served with Norma in the House of Representatives. He respected independent, smart, capable women long before that was a cool thing to do. She was so high on his list of extraordinary women. She excelled at practically everything she did. Norma had a sense of humor and could laugh at herself. She was steady as a rock but able to see the irony in other people.

Norma smashed through the glass ceiling before people knew what glass ceilings were.



She stood out as a freshman legislator – not just because there weren't many females in the legislature – but because of her brilliance, her natural leadership and, let's face it, her blonde good looks. The media couldn't take their eyes off her.

Norma never became cocky. She used the attention to pursue substantive changes in environmental law, land-use law and in fighting laws that blatantly discriminated against women. Laws that now seem ridiculous. Things like inheritance laws that taxed widows after their husbands died.

Norma remembered this from when she was a child. Farm wives, who worked along side their husbands running a farm, would have to pay an inheritance tax if their husbands died – as if they didn't already own the farm. Had the wife died first, her husband would not have had to pay an inheritance tax.

This issue led to one of the more memorable exchanges on the House floor.

Norma and the late Rep. Mary Rieke, a Republican colleague, had brought a bill in 1973 to grant widows equal treatment with widowers on inheritance taxes, but it didn't pass. They came back in 1975 to what looked like a sure thing. They had their votes lined up.

Rieke carried the bill on the floor. She wasn't a legislator who sought the spotlight or hogged the microphone. Norma once described her as a traditional, conservative lady. But Rieke had poured a lot of time and effort into this bill. She made a presentation to the House urging a yes vote and then sat down.

Out of nowhere, a Portland Democrat named Wally Priestley, stood up, took the microphone and said, "I move to reconsider."

Under legislative procedures, Priestley's gesture could stop the bill.

Mary Rieke, this prim, traditional conservative, jumped to her feet, and yelled "Wally Priestley, you \*\*\*\*\*!"

Norma later described in her memoir what happened next: "(Mary) grasped her chest and got pale and fell into her chair, and then she and the chair went ass over teakettle."

The Speaker of the House gavelled a recess. Rep. Paul Walden – father of Greg Walden – helped Mary to her feet. Norma took her by the arm, and other members of the women's caucus gathered around. They gave her a standing ovation.

By the time my generation of female legislators came along, we no longer had to prove to voters that women could be politicians. It was accepted.

Norma called herself a political animal, so I'm going to get political in her honor.

When Norma entered the Legislature in 1971, it was a very different world from the one currently in session. She was a Republican, and it was the majority party in the House. In the Senate, the Democrats were the majority by number, but there were conservative D's willing to cross the aisle. Major bills weren't a slam-dunk. They had to be carefully crafted. There had to be a more bipartisan spirit.

An even a bigger difference: The party leaders in both chambers were not all from the Willamette Valley. House leadership in Norma's first term included Lynn Newbry from Medford, Stafford Hansell from Hermiston and Bob House, the speaker, from Burns.

While there were different constituencies, they didn't divide themselves into outspoken, demanding tribes. In her memoir, "The Only Woman in the Room," Norma described her constituents like this: "I had a monastery and a nunnery, a strong Catholic community, a strong farming community, organized pulp and paper workers, the business community, the Russian community, the Hispanic community, and then downtown Salem, with its university and its affluent population. It was a very mixed bag."

A true representative of the people can hold a mixed bag together. Norma did.

By 1986, when she ran against Neil Goldschmidt for governor, the shift to dominance by the west side of the state was under way. At one point in the campaign, Goldschmidt said he didn't want to debate Norma in Bend because it was "in the middle of nowhere."

It was a revealing slip. Today, the four top leaders in the House and Senate are from the Willamette Valley – three of them from Portland.

Eastern Oregon remains so different from urban Oregon. Norma learned lessons in Harney County that she might not have learned had she grown up surrounded by urban services and opportunities.

When Norma talked about her childhood, it wasn't oh-woe-is-me. She didn't dwell on the outhouse she and her family used in one of their early homes in Harney County. She was matter-of-fact about what her family didn't have. She didn't use it as an excuse for giving up and not trying.

She believed everyone should contribute something to their community, and she didn't mean money. She thought people should inform themselves about current issues and know enough about history to understand context. As a freshman legislator, Norma told the Associated Press that the fewer people who assume these obligations, the less the system works.

She has been proven right. In the current session, we have more bills to consider than ever. The public can't possibly keep track of them. People would be astonished at how some of these bills could change their lives.

What would Norma, who was expected to show maturity as a teenager, think of legislators who want to expand adolescence into a person's mid-20's because their brains aren't developed?

We desperately need more Normas in the legislature, and I don't mean women. I mean pragmatic moderates.

She was a Republican who was ahead of her time on many issues regarding the environment and land use. Perhaps her most disturbing prediction to come true was that the Republican Party was "doing itself in" by embracing the religious right to the exclusion of reasonable conservatives like her.

We now have a one-party state.

What would Norma do?

Norma liked to recall Saturday nights growing up in Harney County when everybody – young and old – gathered at the Poison Creek Grange Hall to dance and listen to music. If a 5-year-old boy asked you to dance, you said yes. That's how it was.

Years later when she took her fiancé Bill to the Burns Elks Club to introduce him to her hometown, she told him the code of conduct: "If a woman asks you to dance – which is very likely – you must dance. I don't care what she looks like, who she is, or how drunk or how tall or how short she is, you have to dance with her. That's just the Code of the West over here."

So what would Norma do in this political climate? I think she'd be asking her political opponents for a dance – and daring them to say no.

END