

Senior's Foundation and LAAA to salute Helen Boosalis

As an active supporter and board member of the Seniors Foundation, Helen Boosalis rarely missed a meeting. She gave her time generously for group presentations and emceed a variety of foundation-supported events. She was in constant search for city support for the Lincoln Area Agency on Aging and the Seniors Foundation. Helen felt that LAAA's programs were the responsibility of the City of Lincoln, and she was keenly aware of the need for Foundation recognition for all the support it brings

to LAAA. She also kept the feet of the staff and board to the fire of governance and fundraising.

Helen Boosalis promoted cooperative programs and projects with like-missioned entities in the community. She fought for older adult access to transportation, the Internet, services and information. She served as an outstanding role model for older adults in this community. She will be greatly missed. I hope the community will be able to hear the whispers of her influence as the Seniors Foundation moves forward.



Diane Rolfsmeyer,
Executive Director,
Seniors Foundation

Helen Boosalis—public servant, trailblazer, voice for the community, advocate for justice, political pioneer. Helen Boosalis died June 15, 2009. In honor of her supportive leadership and unwavering character, we are dedicating this issue to Helen.

Helen: In Her Own Words

From a September, 2008 interview with AARP's Prime Time radio host Mike Cutbert, Helen Boosalis talked about her life in politics and some of the decisions that framed her legacy.

In the late 50s Helen Boosalis got involved in Lincoln's public policy scene with the League of Women Voters. After

being appointed president of that group, she was encouraged by fellow members to run for city council. At the time there was a climate in which many men still believed a woman's place was in the home, "My husband supported me," she said. "When tough issues came up Mike would say to me as I went out the door. 'Go get 'em Helen.'"

Lincoln had a part time-mayor and a part-time city council when Helen was elected to

city council. Boosalis' early campaign on the city council was for a strong mayoral form of government. "There wasn't any strong, administrative leadership," Boosalis said. "I thought Lincoln had grown to the size where that's what we needed. You couldn't do it with independent directors of each department running the show." She served on the city council for 16 years.

Then in 1975, she ran for mayor of Lincoln. "When I decided, I had so much support from people in the community, and I thought that two terms was enough for any mayor to get done what that mayor had in mind, and that it was time to have a change and that's why I got into it." When asked why she decided to get into the mayor's race just three weeks prior to the election she

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Helen Boosalis –
on taking risks.

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Helen: In Her Own Words (continued)

said she knew it would affect her family and her home life. "I knew if I did it, it would be 100 percent because that's how I am. It may not have been that way before that, but that's the way it would be for me."

During the 1970s, political attitudes toward women were changing. Helen said that one of her biggest challenges at the time, was in getting the support of older women. She learned that the better known a woman candidate is, the less dominated by stereotypes she is. Helen shared this example, "One of the things that struck me when I first ran for city council was that certain men, and certain women, would support me. However, there was one group who could not be strongly behind me—and that was older women. I found that so strange, until later when I came to believe that because they thought they couldn't do, they thought I couldn't do, and so I had to change their mind. And I think they did, because they became supporters later. But not in that early election."

She changed many minds about women, not only in politics, but about women as capable leaders.

Boosalis selected a new chief of police from outside the pool of existing Lincoln police department candidates. In the process, she alienated several city council members.

Helen Boosalis was asked by her daughter

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Helen Boosalis –
on becoming
Mayor of Lincoln.

Beth, "How could you take the risks you did and not be afraid of the results?" She said she didn't see a lot of these things as risks, "Because often if you just step back, taking a risk, is not taking a risk, it's just doing the right thing."

Shortly after leaving the office of mayor, Boosalis was asked by Governor Bob Kerry to be the Director of the Department of Aging. "It seemed appropriate for me having left eight years as mayor, 16 years on the city council, and my age then (she was 63), and they were looking for a new director so I accepted." At the time aging issues were not a large concern for voters and the public. "And with the aging

population, it was even more important," she added. "So I did it, and then I sort of did that as I did my political career--going out to the people. I had an office in the statehouse, but I was out at the senior centers more often than I sat in that statehouse—trying to get people to be involved in their government. Just because you are old, doesn't mean you are separated from society. You still play a pretty key part."

When asked what led her from the state office to her position with the national office of the AARP council and eventually chairman of the board, she simply said "They asked me," and when she looked at what the AARP could and would do, she said she knew that's where she wanted to go.



To honor her legacy, the Seniors Foundation is partnering with LAAA to create a significant memorial worthy of carrying the Helen Boosalis name.

All contributions will be held in trust until the Boosalis memorial has been unveiled. If you would like to be a part of this historic memorial, please send a check made out to the Seniors Foundation. Put Helen Boosalis on the memo line and return it in the enclosed envelope.

Helen Geankoplis Boosalis 1919-2009

Born the daughter of Greek immigrants, Helen Geankoplis, Minneapolis, Minnesota on Aug. 28, 1919.



Married Mike Boosalis in 1945 when he was home on furlough from WWII. Daughter, Mary Beth, was born in 1948.

Moved to Lincoln in 1951. Began volunteering with the League of Women Voters. Fellow members of the League elected her president.

Upset an incumbent councilman in 1959 and was re-elected to city council three times. Entered the race for Mayor just three weeks prior to the election.

1919

1930

1940

1950

1960

June Pederson Remembers Helen's Gifts

We asked June Pederson, Director of the Lincoln Area Agency on Aging, to share some of her thoughts about Helen Boosalis.

Q: What impact do you believe Helen Boosalis had on the Lincoln Area Agency on Aging and the Seniors Foundation?

A: Helen understood that the City of Lincoln was made up of all its citizens, including seniors. She supported the program during her term as mayor and continued to be an advocate after she left office. Her service to AARP was a wonderful gift to that organization. Her advocacy on behalf of seniors nationally reflected positively on Lincoln and on our work at LAAA.

Q: Are there any personal experiences you had with Helen that you'd like to share with our readers?

A: Helen remained interested in the work done by Aging staff and was always an advocate. Last December, I attended a fundraiser for a newly announced candidate for the Lincoln City Council. I'd not met the candidate and was interested in knowing more. I introduced myself and the candidate said, "Helen Boosalis said I should meet you. I'm glad you are here tonight." I was impressed because the candidate had the good sense to meet with Helen before making the decision to run and flattered that Helen suggested the candidate should meet me. It was a tribute to the work done by the Agency staff and showed Helen's respect for what we do. I was very pleased. The candidate was elected, by the way.

Q: Looking back at Helen's career and her achievements, what does her life tell you about Lincoln, Nebraska and the people who live here?

A: When Helen became an activist in the community and served as an elected leader, Lincoln was a growing, vibrant city in which people supported programs and services with their time, energy and resources. She encouraged neighborhood growth and supported neighborhood associations. She understood that first impressions make a difference and made the city more beautiful by planting trees and expanding parks and green space. Under Helen's guidance, people understood that there was a return on their tax dollar in those services.

Q: What are you currently doing that you think Helen Boosalis would be happy about?

A: I think she would be pleased with the volunteer programs. In 2007-08, our RSVP program had 556 people registered and they volunteered services totaling more than \$2 million in value. The willingness of people to volunteer and give back to the community has a huge impact on the success of that community.

Q: What can we learn from Helen Boosalis?

A: Helen was an energetic engaged mayor who treated everyone equally. She expected good things and generally reaped positive results from that expectation. She knew what was going on around the country.

Q: What would you say to Helen if she were here today?

A: I'm so grateful. You were a friend and a supporter. You valued the work we do at this Agency and shared that with others. You rarely declined an invitation and when you arrived, everyone in the room knew you were there. I'm a better person for knowing you and Lincoln is a better city thanks to your leadership and caring.



June Pederson,
LAAA Director

Upset incumbent Mayor Sam Schwartzkopf and in 1975 became Lincoln's first female mayor.

Served eight years as mayor of Lincoln. Broke down many of the 'Good Old Boy' barriers of that time.

Named state director of the Department of Aging, by Bob Kerry in 1982.

Served as honorary chair for the Lincoln/Lancaster Senior Centers Foundation in 1983.

Ran as the Democratic candidate for governor in 1986 in the United States' first match-up of major party female gubernatorial candidates.

Served as chairwoman of the board of directors of the American Association of Retired Persons from 1996-98.

Served on the board of directors for the Seniors Foundation from 1999 to 2002.

1970

1980

1990

2000

2009



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A Good Long Walk



Mary Jane Nielsen,
Seniors Foundation
Board President

My fondest memory of Helen Boosalis takes me back to the year 2000 when I was asked to visit her in her home, when compiling and editing the book "Year 2000 and Beyond" for Girl Scouts. When I called Helen to see what time would work to stop by, she said that she was going to take a "good long walk" and after that we could meet.

When I arrived, she had just finished her walk and she had an unforgettable glow about her. She was relaxed, refreshed, smiling, and seemed satisfied. She practiced and obviously knew the benefit of a good long walk—for many reasons: mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual—because it showed. I felt inspired and encouraged as I left her home.

As a young girl I always had high regards for Helen. I learned about her involvement in community and government, and she was a role model for me. I thought also about her "walk in

life" throughout the years. That day, reflecting on both of her "walks" gave me encouragement for my own life "walk."

Helen Boosalis held many roles in the public eye—especially her terms as the first female mayor of Lincoln and the historic governor's race. Years later our paths crossed again, as I became involved in the League of Women Voters.

As I have become a part of the Seniors Foundation, once again I have found "my path" to cross hers. Helen's commitment and service to the aging population has impacted and influenced many. Life is better today for countless seniors in Lincoln and Lancaster County.

There are many ways we can make a difference in the "life walk" of seniors and like Helen, we too will be able to look back on our own "walk through life" with contentment and satisfaction—that only comes from helping others.