

Elois Zeanah: A Life Well Lived

Nearly fifty-two years ago, I began a great journey with Elois. Along that journey we were joined by two wonderful children, Derek in Atlanta then Kristen in California, and just a few years ago by our wonderful granddaughter Sagan. The journey started in Gordo, but in time it took us up, down, and across America and eventually to many parts of the Western World. In 2003, it brought us back to Tuscaloosa. Elois made many, many friends along the way, especially in Washington, DC, Southern California, and lately Alabama. Yet almost all her friends knew her for just a season. I rise to speak because I realize very few know the whole arc of this life and I want to honor the character, the personal growth, and the passion with which she lived.

She was born in Fayette, AL on October 25, 1941. She grew up in greater Tupelo. In her early years she and her family lived two doors away from their church friends Vernon and Gladys Presley and their son Elvis who got his middle name after Elois' father Aaron. At their church every Sunday, they made a joyful noise and loved and shared the Southern gospel tradition, as you may have heard here today.

By middle school, the family had moved to Shannon ,MS where Elois in due time graduated second in her class in 1959 from Shannon High School. With no way to attend college, she well understood that she had no future unless she found one outside of Mississippi. At age seventeen, with fifty dollars in her purse, a rail pass, and her mother to accompany her, she travelled to Washington, D.C. to begin her career as a personnel clerk at FBI Headquarters. At work she showed intelligence, initiative and drive and was soon promoted. At her single room in a strange city she fought deep loneliness. She sought out a church and found friendships there.

Her young career was soon cut short, however, when her father suffered a catastrophic accident at the railroad that left him a paraplegic. The family needed her, so she returned home to help. In 1962, she moved with her family to Gordo when they bought a business there that her father would run. Later that year we met - two weeks before I returned to college in Massachusetts. We had both found the love of our life. Later that year she took a job in Huntsville. Then I did,

too. The next summer we spent together and secretly eloped just before I returned to college again.

The following months of separation, punctuated by secret meetings and passionate reunions was to be a treasured memory the rest of our lives. She always thought that was the most romantic year of her life. By the end of that year, Elois moved to Cambridge.

Elois began her ascent. She had always wanted to be a teacher, but college was beyond her reach at that time in her life. She always knew if you can't do what you want, you'd better do with what you've got. It turned out she had a lot.

For openers, he had exquisite secretarial skills. She was always an incredibly fast and accurate typist and took dictation even faster. As any executive knows, the person out front can make you look incompetent or make you look like a genius. Elois produced geniuses. She had all the winning qualities – poise, tact, energy, initiative, trust, the ability to write better than her bosses, the ability to handle complex situations and difficult people with grace, not to mention being the loveliest woman in the building.

Every place she worked, her talent would out, and she rose quickly. In NASA/Huntsville she went from the secretarial pool to the executive suite in a few months. When she moved to Cambridge, she was hired on the spot at Hanscom Air Force Base /Lincoln Labs and in a few months was working for one of the principal directors of the new NASA Electronic Research Center near MIT.

In Washington, when she resumed her career a few years later, she was not looking to work, but an old friend called with an opportunity she could not refuse at the Commerce Department. She took a position working for an Assistant Secretary of Commerce running an operation to flush out the senior ranks of the Department and infuse it with new talent from outside the Government. When that job wound down, she moved to Virginia Knauer's White House Office of Consumer Affairs, where she was the principal assistant to the Deputy. As the months went by, her boss was appointed and confirmed as Chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. She went with him as his executive assistant.

Her future looked very promising at that point and she might have gone a long way. But I was offered a very attractive job in Los Angeles. We discussed it a lot. We knew nothing about California. Attractive new jobs can go sour pretty fast. She seemed on a fast track. Watergate Washington was a mess, and she detested some of the folks she had to interact with. In the end, we decided to go and she gave it all up, because in her heart of hearts she really wanted to have a second child.

We settled in a beautiful suburb of Los Angeles called Thousand Oaks that was to be our home for 26 years.

Soon after we got there, an incident happened that tells a lot about Elois's character. A headhunter called her. Norton Simon, a California billionaire and art patron and his actress wife Jennifer Jones were doing a search for an executive assistant and social secretary at their beautiful house in Malibu. Elois had been suggested by someone in Washington. So Elois drove our old Dart down to their home for an interview. True to her history, the interviews went very well, and he offered her the job on the spot. While the terms of the job were a little unusual, it was a dream job. Work would start at 5 AM when New York opened and be over at 2 when the markets closed. Some social events were extra. The pay was fabulous. But Mr. Simon wanted one covenant – that she would not get pregnant in the next five years. Without a moment's hesitation, she said "I can't do that", "it's been a pleasure", and left. Within a year, our daughter Kristen was born.

For the next ten years or so, she happily stayed home, raised her kids and helped at their schools.

In the late 1980's, Elois entered the most challenging and ultimately the most triumphant period of her life. She had left Washington with a kind of disgust for government. She felt that narrow interests, both political and economic, easily and like viruses could infest the mechanisms of democratic government. Not only could they, but they do, pervasively, and it is actually an industry. She felt if you looked hard enough at many government actions appearing to be for public good, you were likely to find coalitions of narrow bureaucratic and economic special interests behind them enriching themselves somehow from the public treasury. She was to find out it wasn't just a problem in Washington.

It started out pretty simply but got complicated. She and some of her friends became concerned about problems brought on by the rapid growth of their beautiful semi-rural city. They took their concerns to the City Council, over and over. Their complaints fell on deaf ears. So she began to raise the heat. She turned out enough concerned citizens to pack the Council Chambers. The public comment section of Council meetings became lengthy and heated. But still there were no result except flaired tempers. The entrenched City government cared much more about growing a bloated tax base and building monuments to themselves than about the impacts they were causing to the quality of life of neighborhoods and people in the City, and development interests which stood to gain tens or hundreds of millions on some projects were only too happy to “help” the City. She realized nothing would change unless there was a change of faces on the council.

So she began a multi-year campaign to recruit new and talented young candidates and to help them win office in Thousand Oaks and Ventura County. In successive elections over the next ten years, the candidates recruited, mentored, and often managed by her lost only two races.

She was the first to be elected. Seated on the Council, she was in 4 to 1 minority, but seldom won any votes for her initiatives. But she shined a lot of unwelcome light from the inside about what was really was happening at City Hall. The four became more and more furious at her and sometimes truly abusive. It was noisy. Council meetings often lasted well past midnight. Meetings were broadcast over the public access channel of the cable TV network and ratings went way up. The viewership I was told included legislators in Sacramento. The meetings became known as the Tuesday Night Fights.

Another election rolled around. Elois groomed another candidate, and the minority became 3 to 2. They were a serious threat now. Even worse, she had a fan base. She was voted Best Civic Leader in an opinion poll by the Los Angeles Daily News. The development forces felt truly threatened.

Her next election, six candidates were put up to run against Elois in an effort to dilute her popular vote. It didn't work. Elois easily won reelection. Next thing we knew, the husband of her ally on the Council saw his job at a local corporation transferred to Boulder, Colorado. His wife stayed anyway until the end of her term. Ultimately, a messenger from the development forces showed up with word that that a rather obnoxious and controversial project with a large

tax increment to the City was coming before the City Council. If she did not oppose the project, they would run no further opponents against her and support her well in future elections; if she opposed it they would drive her out of office. She told them flatly she would oppose it. And war broke out.

They tried harassment. They repeatedly threw nails under our tires. She got threatening notes. Private detectives investigated our children and us. They tried to bring public discredit on her. They threatened ruinous personal lawsuits. It got intense and divisive, and it was difficult for our family, and especially so for our teenage daughter, Kristi. But Elois would not yield. Then in a city where no electoral candidate had ever spent more than \$40,000 on a campaign, they rolled out a recall effort that eventually spent more than \$400,000 officially reported and probably a lot more not reported. Platoons of paid petition gatherers swept through the city. She was slandered without mercy. Little ole Elois was accused of being responsible for a (phony) typhoid outbreak. They accused her of voting to allow the sewer system to fail and that the city was in imminent danger of sewage running through the streets. It was nasty campaign. She fought it out on every street in the city. It was difficult and exhausting.

She would have been outspent \$8 to 1 in that recall if Ed Masry, the lawyer portrayed in the Erin Brockavich movie, had not called to contribute \$50,000. So in the end she was only outspent 5 or 6 to 1. But she won the recall vote almost 2 to 1. It was cathartic and a turning point in the City.

She served eight years as city councilwoman and one term as mayor. The election the year she retired finally saw the good guys take the majority.

There is another City Council meeting in T.O. tonight. There will be a resolution and a vote, and I am told tomorrow the flags in Thousand Oaks will be lowered to half-mast in her honor.

We had always wanted to return to Alabama, and in 2003 we finally did. Frankly I wasn't sure we would fit in. True to her nature, Elois didn't worry about it, she just dived in. She was an active member of First Presbyterian Church, a graduate of Leadership Tuscaloosa, a tireless docent at the Warner Museum, past Board Member of the Girl Scouts and FOCUS on Senior Citizens, member and past president of the Modern Culture Club, member and past president of RWTC, member of the County and State Republican Executive Committees, and for four years

President of the Alabama Federation of Republican Women and member of the Steering Committee of the Alabama Republican Party. In the latter roles, she nearly wore out her car travelling up, down and across the state to speak to women's groups and county Republican committees, She shined her light on political issues, advocated for legislation, encouraged many women to greater public leadership, and reminded them all that narrow public/private special interests are at work here too.

Approaching death always reveals the truth of one's character. Soon after she was diagnosed with advanced lymphoma, she began hemorrhaging internally. Her doctor told me she might have less than three weeks to live. When I told her, she thought a moment and said "I have had a good life. There is a lot left I want to do and feel I can do, but if that is not in God's plan, I am ready." She fought the disease with all her strength for another twelve months. In the end it was overwhelming.

She was a lady of grace, courage, optimism, and leadership. She believed in God, her family, and a better country. As one of her recruits in California wrote her, "May God lift her in the palm of his hand."