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Hjellen, Wasilla's first female mayor, dies at age 92

Elizabeth "Pat" Hjellen

May 23, 2009



Mrs. Elizabeth "Pat" Hjellen, 92, lifelong Alaskan died May 20 in Wasilla.

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She is survived by her sisters Ann Short of California, Marie Betts of Wasilla, and six children, all living in Wasilla or Anchorage, Gerrit Hjellen (Jude), Gilbert Hjellen (Silver), Susan Brown (Dave), Alice Hjellen, Pete Hjellen (Diane), Ida McMahan (Willet), 16 grandchildren, 38 great-grandchildren, and three great-great-grandchildren.

What do you say about a person who has lived such a full life and touched so many in so many different ways? An era passes? Elizabeth "Pat" Hjellen was the first of four children of Gerrit "Heinie" and Alice Snider, born in Ship Creek Tent City, Nov. 7, 1916. She was the first girl baptized at the Presbyterian Church on the Park Strip, which was just completed with the help of her father and Elmer Rasmuson. She attended the first school in Wasilla. 1922 found the Snider family living in Pitman and Wasilla in need of a school. Permission was given for Wasilla to erect a small school if at least six children could be found to attend school. Only the five Olberg children could be found. It was decided Pat would stay with friends and start first grade in the first Wasilla school year even though she was only 5 at the time. The Wasilla Community Hall (now the Wasilla Museum) was completed in 1932. This new building was big enough for basketball. Pat played on the first Wasilla girl's basketball team. This time Pat's youngest sister, Marie, was brought up from junior high to play high school basketball. Living in a cabin near the High Grade Mine in Hatcher Pass, she graduated first in her class (of 2) in 1935. She went on to college in Fairbanks where she played basketball on an undefeated team.

Her greatest accomplishment has to be in raising a family in Wasilla. Pat and husband Al, moved back to Wasilla from Anchorage with six children in tow around 1948 into the log cabin next to the Community Hall. Pat and her sisters, Ann and Marie, were some of the first families to have telephones in Wasilla, three longs and a short. Two years later Pat moved with her family to one of the original Colonists homesteads three miles from Wasilla on the Palmer/Wasilla Highway. Here, Pat made the years at "The Farm" memorable, teaching us the importance of country (stand at attention, hand over heart, when you hear the national anthem), family (family sticks together), religion, honesty, hard work and to enjoy life. Much of it by example. On Sundays, Pat would be playing the organ in the Presbyterian Church with her six kids neatly lined up right behind her. Many nights in the winter her children would be beside the highway waiting for her to return from a long day working at Teeland's Country store. She would tie the toboggan to the back of the car and pull them home, seeing if they could stay on. Years later Pat and her family operated the Wasilla Roadhouse. This was truly a family operation as the family did everything from pumping gas, changing linen, serving meals, cooking, cleaning, and of course, washing lots of dishes. When her kids told her they were going to run away from home, she would tell them, "as soon as you finish your chores, I will pack you a lunch."

By now, the children were beginning to move away, establishing their own lives. In time each would be drawn back to the family in Alaska and rejoin Pat and Al at festive holiday family gatherings, Sunday's for sourdough pancakes, and other occasions. The decibel level continued to rise as each of her children arrived. But Pat would be heard above all others.

Pat served her country, Alaska, and most of all the community of Wasilla in much the same way as she did everything in life. With dedication and a desire to see Wasilla grow and thrive. Like her father, Pat loved politics, and eventually parlayed that love to being on the first Wasilla City Council and eventually the first woman mayor of Wasilla.

Pat was also a charter member of the Pioneers of Alaska, Igloo 11 and a lifetime member of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary where she served with honor in local, state and national VFW offices.

Pat and Al exemplified a dedication and love for each other and their family that is hard to put to words but you only had to be around them for a short time to feel the connection they had for each other and what they gave to their many families. Pat will certainly be missed but never forgotten.

The service will be held 2 p.m., Tuesday at the Wasilla VFW. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Alaska Chapter 511 or The Wasilla VFW, Post 9365.

Arrangements were with Valley Funeral Home and Crematory in Wasilla.

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