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# Gretchen Kafoury: The Personal is Political

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Gretchen Kafoury:  
The personal is political

Documentation of  
Special Collections  
Thesis exhibit

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The Portland State University Special Collections department is located on the first floor of the Millar library. Approximately three times a year, they create an exhibit highlighting parts of their collections. These exhibits reside in four horizontal cases in the first floor elevator lobby. Previous to my thesis, I had been a part of a class that had designed an exhibit for the space on the topic of the student strike of 1970 and how it changed the campus. After the class ended in spring, I took up an internship at PSU Special Collections and at the City of Portland archives to complete the project. This introduction to archives became the foundation for exhibit design and began my realization that museum work was possible.

While completing the PSU student strike exhibit, Special Collections acquired 20 additional boxes of documents from the family of Gretchen Kafoury following her death. She had previously personally given PSU a large collection at the time of her retirement from the Portland City Council; a posthumous gift was expected even if her death at age 72 was not. Creating an exhibit about Gretchen Kafoury would both allow me the freedom to create my own exhibit from scratch and begin the process of making a finding guide for the recently collected documents as well as honor a woman whose decades of work exemplified what it meant to be a public servant.

The thesis project took three terms. I created a timeline and rubric for myself in order to keep the project moving forward and as a way for my advisor, Dr Cristine Paschild, to gauge my work and progress. I allowed for an entire semester of exploration; from my previous experience in Kaia Sand's class I knew that leaving enough space to investigate the documents was an important aspect of creating an exciting exhibit. This was especially true with the new collection, but was still important with the previous accession. By researching different aspects of Kafoury's documents and how they related to the wider world, I was able to find what story would be the most interesting to tell.

In anticipation of the 2016 political season, it seemed a natural fit to explore Kafoury through a political lens. Before she was a politician, however, she had been an activist, and she carried her activist principles with her through all the offices she held. This

through-line, of liberal activism as both politics and personal statement, was both a compelling exhibit narrative and relevant to current events. Beyond the presidential election of 2016 taking on a personal tone for many Americans, Portland's local political climate had likewise been active in reaction to the unfolding housing crisis within the metro area. As Kafoury was a passionate advocate of affordable housing for Portland's marginal populations, the time to explore her politics as an extension of her moral philosophy was highly relevant.

Creating an exhibit from primary sources creates a number of challenges. The Gretchen Kafoury collection consists primarily of paper documents, roughly 8.5x11 inches, from the 1970's-1990's. Their relative young age and condition made working with the collection significantly easier than older and more fragile collections and allowed for greater opportunities for display since few restrictions were placed on UV light exposure or other potential dangers. The issue with creating an exhibit from these items came more from their visual ubiquity than their delicate nature. Working primarily with paper documents in a horizontal case, it can be challenging to tell a visually compelling story. This increased the pressure to find tell the most interesting story I could, trying to relate her experiences in the past to the present times, which is the work of public historians generally. Beyond choosing which objects to highlight, an exhibit based on historic objects requires interpretation. I used the interpretive text panels to both contextualize the object and try to relate it into the current day with the intention of creating relevance for the casual visitor who may not be knowledgeable about the era or the subject, and hopefully in less than 50 words.

Exhibits such as these, created from archival documents and displayed in a public sphere, create unique opportunities for storytelling. Unlike museums where the audience is self-selecting, a display in a truly public space has the potential to reach an audience who isn't intending to have a cultural experience. I wanted to find a way to create a conversation between the visitor, intentional or accidental, and Special Collections. Creating participatory elements would have the potential of having audience members engage more deeply into the exhibit as well as become a place to build community. To this end, I decided upon two elements; the first was a scrapbook made of surrogate copies from Kafoury's own scrapbooks and the second was a

conversation wall. The notebook was created from copies taken from her 18 repurposed three-ring notebooks that she used as scrapbooks. Objects were selected for both their use as an example of what she kept as well as their charm. The book was then put on a podium and left open. I have noticed guests flipping through the pages and reading the annotations I attached to some of the pages with self-adhering notes.

The conversation wall, conceptually as well as physically, was easier to execute than the fun but time consuming scrapbook, but created much more angst for me. Once I knew generally what I wanted to ask, I agonized over the wording and created several drafts before deciding on the text that was used. It was also the last element of the exhibit to go up, partly because I was not sure how people would respond. While at first, I was more concerned about people responding inappropriately, the closer we got to installation the more concerned I became that no one would participate at all. We discussed in Special Collections the best way to scaffold the experience to provide for the best outcome. We decided that a second podium placed under the question with a few blank sticky notes would create a space for the participant to write out their response and that by placing the element in the busiest part of the hallway we would have maximum exposure. Almost immediately people began adding thoughtful replies to the question, and, even more exciting, was when visitors began replying to each other's replies. This evidence of conversation creation reaffirmed my belief that historic exhibits in public places can create a place for audience and artifacts to interact.

By using Gretchen Kafoury's political life as a backdrop, I was able to talk about the realities of living as a woman in the time of second-wave feminism, the challenges of being a single, working mother in the 1970's and 80's, and highlight how policies, implemented or not, have real-world effects as well as highlight the fact that our politicians are also just people. Telling these stories about the past help visitors to put their current worlds in context, and telling relevant stories in the informal space of an elevator lobby hopefully makes the casual visitor more receptive to museum-going experiences in the future.

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## **Addendum**

### **EXHIBIT TITLE CARD**

*The Personal is Political: The Civic Life of Gretchen Kafoury*

Gretchen Kafoury (June 23, 1942 – March 13, 2015) was a politician whose personal ideals formed the backbone of her lengthy career in public service. In 2015, Portland Mayor Charlie Hales recognized her as “a colleague, an ally, a partner—and always the conscience of our community.” While an avowed liberal, Kafoury recognized the need to work across political boundaries in order to get things done. She dedicated her time and voice to communities she saw as underserved, and helped build and protect a social safety net in all her elected positions.

This exhibit highlights her political life and achievements, from her earliest days as a grassroots organizer for women’s rights and a volunteer for progressive campaigns to her own political career at the state and local levels. Her unwavering commitment to equal rights and her steadfast advocacy, even after her retirement from public life, for more affordable housing in Portland speak to how Gretchen Kafoury’s personal philosophies guided her civic work.

*"My beliefs are no longer theoretical—I have seen how in a time of economic prosperity, the City of Portland has had a widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Much of our social policy is couched in 'livability,' but actually means we cater to the haves and ignore the have-nots."* Gretchen Kafoury in 1998

## **CASE #1**

Item descriptions:

- Like many politically active women, Gretchen Kafoury began her progressive activism by working on the campaigns of others. Bobby Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign was her first. While George McGovern was the popular candidate for the Democrat candidate in 1972, Kafoury backed Hawaii native Patsy Mink. Kafoury was Mink's only pledged delegate from Oregon, and the two became friends.
- Kafoury stayed involved with various organizations from her earliest days in Portland and throughout her lifetime. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom was one that she remained active in. This particular newsletter advertises a lecture by Dr. Linda Gordon, the daughter of childcare advocate Helen Gordon. Other organizations Kafoury was a part of included the United Farm Workers and the short-lived Committee to Defend the Right to Protest.
- The United Farm Workers put out this woodblock and typewritten pamphlet along with a statement from César Chávez printed in English and Spanish on how to support the rights of farm laborers.
- The Committee to Defend the Right to Protest was a direct-action protest group. Many recognizable politically active and culturally progressive Oregonians participated in the Committee.
- Throughout Kafoury's documents are Quaker meeting bulletins. The Quaker faith is strictly anti-war. This bulletin, besides updating the membership on upcoming protests, had a particularly charming border advocating direct action.
- One of the first big actions taken by Kafoury and her group "Politically Organized Women" was to protest the Portland City Club. The membership voted against admitting women in 1971. Kafoury and others organized weekly pickets in front of the Club. After one year and three votes, POW finally won and women were allowed into the City Club.
- The Portland City Club now hosts the State of the City and State of the County addresses. As Chair of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners, Deborah Kafoury (Gretchen's daughter) has given the address there for the last two years, including in June 2015, three months after her mother's passing.

## **CASE #2**

*Early Political Career*

Gretchen Kafoury's formative political experiences were as a volunteer working on national and local campaigns, including her first husband Stephen Kafoury's initial attempt to become an Oregon State Senator. As a mother of young children—like many of her contemporaries—Kafoury often brought her children with her to organizing meetings. One group, the "Wednesday Winos," met weekly to discuss politics and feminism. Their first protest action in 1972 was against the exclusion of women from the venerable City Club, one of the most influential organizations in the city.

Renaming themselves the "Politically Organized Women" or "POW," the group began a public campaign to end the City Club's discriminatory membership policy. It took one year, numerous demonstrations, and three City Club votes before women were made eligible for club membership. The experience Kafoury gained from this direct action prepared her for her next role as State Legislative Coordinator for the National Organization for Women.

#### Item descriptions:

- Kafoury was instrumental in the co-founding of the Oregon Women's Political Caucus, a bipartisan organization for women lawmakers. The OWPC supported up-and-coming woman politicians and eventually formed the Oregon Women's Campaign School.
- This phone tree highlights both the effort it took to organize in the pre-digital era as well as how many women on the list went on in Oregon politics.
- The "Ladies' Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society" was a mock organization that grew out of the OWPC.
- This Do-It Yourself Political Involvement Kit is an excellent example of the kind of work the OWPC did in organizing and supporting young politicians regardless of gender.
- Oregon had a number of restrictions on access to abortion, including a residency requirement. Kafoury assisted women seeking abortions in a number of ways, including volunteering for an organization that helped women find abortion providers and temporarily housing women coming from other states.
- Abortion Referral Service documents show how volunteers walked women through finding a provider both over the phone and in person. Services like these helped women navigate the process of finding a provider and understanding their rights.
- The Birth Control Handbook was published by a Canadian university. Copies had to be hand-carried since the information inside, pertaining to reproductive health, abortion, birth control and childbirth, was considered "obscene materials." This copy is from 1974.



- Kafoury was a tireless champion for women's equality, including access to credit and the right to choose your own last name after marriage. Handbooks such as these were passed around and sold at conventions so women would know what their rights were under the law.
- Note the doodle from Kafoury's second daughter [Tamara] on the bottom of the OSPIRG report. This highlights the fact that Kafoury was a working mother throughout her entire political career.

### **Case #3**

Item descriptions:

- Kafoury's first days were in Salem where she continued her work on feminist and social issues. These documents highlight the process of bill creation, from idea to draft to vote.
- Her later years were more locally focused. At both the County and City level, she continued her work around equity and public safety.
- An outtake from the official Multnomah County Commissioners photograph is a telling reminder of Kafoury's humor.

### **Display**

*Scrapbooks*

Kafoury kept scrapbooks of her time as County Commissioner and City Council. These eclectic books, with plastic inserts for the pages, used repurposed 3-ring binders, often with the original report covers still attached. The content of the scrapbooks, often annotated, include:

- Newspaper clippings
- Text of Kafoury's speeches
- Invitations and thank-you cards she received
- Programs from events
- Photographs

... and many other items that gave meaning to the work she did on behalf of Multnomah County and the City of Portland. Below is a re-creation of one of her scrapbooks, drawing from some of the 22 binders in the Portland State University Library Special Collections' Gretchen Kafoury Papers.

### **Vertical case:**

This case contains just a few of the hundreds of buttons Kafoury collected. Most are political in nature, with campaign buttons for both local and national elections making the bulk of the collection. A few were more general, either for the City of Portland or with an uplifting message.

### **Case #4**

*State, County and City*

*Oregon State Representative 1977-1982*

Kafoury won her own seat in the Oregon Legislature in 1976 and served three terms, continuing her advocacy for women, families, and disenfranchised communities across the state. Some of her legislative victories included:

- Defined domestic violence as a crime and requiring arrest of the perpetrator
- Imposed a fee on marriage licenses that provided funds for domestic violence intervention
- Allowed Nurse Practitioners to write prescriptions and bill insurance companies on their own, making more primary care physicians available in rural and inner-city areas

#### *Multnomah County Commissioner 1985-1990*

After an easy win in 1995, Kafoury took her feminist ideals with her to her position as County Commissioner. As one of the "County Mothers," Kafoury continued to advocate for the people at the bottom. During her tenure the board:

- Created school-based health centers
- Consolidated and coordinated public and private social service agencies

She advocated for steady funding for low-income housing through a real estate transfer fee; the initiative lost after heavy campaigning by the real estate industry. To date Multnomah County does not have a permanent form of income to support low-income housing.

#### *Portland City Council 1990-1998*

Kafoury moved from County to City in 1990, and remained on the City Council until her retirement from politics in 1998. Housing continued to be her main issue; Portland Mayor Bud Clark assisted by giving Kafoury the agencies that would best help the city combat homelessness and housing. Clark lovingly called her the "Housing Czarina." At the city she:

- Formed a non-profit agency, PRCI, to catalog, preserve, and maintain residential hotels for low-income housing
- Worked with private companies and community groups to open up 1000 new affordable housing units during her first term.

Even after the mayoral administration changed, Kafoury did her best to keep affordable housing and livability a priority in Portland.

#### Item descriptions:

- The documents highlighted here from the 1973 Legislative session help to show Kafoury's involvement in passing landmark legislation that placed Oregon as a progressive state.
- Equal Rights Amendment / Equal Rights Association. The feminist lobbying group that hired Kafoury purposefully used the same acronym as the proposed Constitutional Amendment. Kafoury had dozens of ERA buttons from the time.
- This homemade three-ring notebook contains a copy of all the bills and all the drafts proposed in 1973.

- The Equal Rights Amendment passed Oregon's senate twice. This is a copy of the bill signed by supportive senators, including future Portland mayor Vera Katz.
- When she was not holding an elected office of her own, Kafoury helped keep senators informed of upcoming legislation. The 1973 Quick Look Guide produced by the Oregon Women's Political Caucus detailed the feminist legislation proposed during the session. Kafoury's signed copy by Gloria Steinem is an example of how connected she was to the national ERA movement.
- Committee Report on Social Services, including a note Kafoury passed to unknown colleague. The note seems to have captured a moment when her brain was moving faster than her hand could write. Her passionate plea about putting people first is clear, even if every word is not.

### **Interactive display prompt**

"Advice for young people: You can make a difference—get involved in politics, or at least things you believe in. People matter and things don't." --Gretchen Kafoury, 1998

Gretchen Kafoury believed that politicians should truly be public servants and she used her positions to advocate for the common good.

What do you think?

If you were elected to public office, what cause would you fight hardest for?  
Please write your answer on one of the sticky notes and attach to the wall.