

Tribute to Olene S. Walker
by Lynne Ward
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In a recent news interview, Olene Smith Walker, Utah's 15th governor was asked how she wanted to be remembered. She responded: *I want to be remembered as kind and caring and intelligent. That I was willing to listen. And that I was not only willing to talk, but I was willing to do. That I worked my best to improve conditions for everyone in the state.*

It's my privilege to tell you that she WILL be remembered exactly as she wished and why.

I've known Governor Walker for the last 23 years. She appointed me as her deputy chief of staff. Previously, we worked together when she was lieutenant governor and I was the director of the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget.

Like many of you, I've seen her qualities firsthand:

- Never-ending determination
- Keen instinct
- Sharp intellect
- Joyful living
- Gratitude for friendships
- Unwavering ethics

- Hard work –She attained her PhD from the University of Utah and her master's from Stanford
- Multi-tasking –She could put on pantyhose while driving her little red Miata sports car!

- She was on the side of right. Taking the principled action, not the political action was natural for her.

- Her quality of steely-eyed charm – Everyone who comes to meet with the governor wants something. Right??? But she called it like was and would tell someone straight-up if their request was lacking. When visitors exited her office, you never knew if they got what they wanted or not, because either way, they were smiling. She made them feel heard, even when she said “no.”

She brought these core qualities and values to all that she did.

When Olene was elected to the Utah House of Representatives in 1981, she asked then-Speaker of the House Norm Bangerter for advice on becoming an effective legislator. He told her to learn the budget. She did. And, she saw the wisdom of sponsoring the state's rainy day fund legislation. The Fund has been key in maintaining the state's AAA bond ratings, and was instrumental in providing a budgetary cushion for the state's lean years. Her action has protected the state's fiscal health.

When Governor Leavitt left Utah to serve in Washington, D.C., Olene was well-prepared to govern Utah.

She immediately set priorities. Fourteen projects made up the Walker Work Plan. The initial one was ensuring that state and local law enforcement, firefighters and medical responders could communicate by radio through a single network. Utah's coordinated wireless system was first in the nation. Lives have been saved.

But, the most memorable Walker Work Plan achievement was bringing awareness to the importance of reading with a child. It was brilliant on her part to simplify the message to the doable – that reading with a child for just 20 minutes a day was something easy to grasp and do, and, those 20 minutes would become a treasured time of bonding.

In her inaugural address, she said that education was in her DNA. Her father was the Ogden school district superintendent. Her mother was an educator who taught for 21 years.

That DNA combined with a dose of her determination, led her to threaten a veto of the entire state budget. The Legislature was funding other programs over the more critical kindergarten-through-third-grade reading program. She educated all of us that from birth to third grade a child learns to read. Beyond third grade, they read to learn.

She educated the Legislature that she was serious. The reading program got funded! And is still in place today.

Governor Walker tackled reform of Utah's tax code. Who would willingly do this???

Olene put her full energy into serving as governor and honestly approached the position as a temporary one to complete Governor Leavitt's term. But after the end of the 2004 legislative session, she changed her mind. This was bold because the field was crowded. She had friends and colleagues who were running. With the Republican State Convention just six weeks away, she was behind in fund raising and in establishing a campaign infrastructure. But, in a demonstration of her commitment to public service, she wanted to keep serving the people of Utah. She

wanted to show young women in particular, that they could achieve their dreams of serving in high political office.

We know the outcome.

She served out the term as vigorously as ever, showing that every day in an elected official's seat should be used to do good.

One example: she spoke encouraging words at an event for teens in the state's foster care system. She had special concern for these vulnerable youth. After her remarks, two girls followed us out to thank her. This was not uncommon. The security detail had to build extra time into her schedule because we were often delayed before heading to the next appointment. She talked to everyone - with genuine interest and without a script.

Olene left the governor's office at age 75, but she continued to serve beyond Utah's borders by accepting an appointment to the National Park Service Board and serving on a corporate bank board.

She founded the Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service at Weber State University, demonstrating her commitment to education, public policy and civility. She wanted to inspire young people and the larger community to be problem solvers, givers and doers.

Olene Smith Walker made history by becoming Utah's first female lieutenant governor and first female governor. Her legacy includes countless Utahns she inspired to public service; curious young readers who spend 20 minutes a day with a good book; individuals inspired by her words and actions; those who benefited from her legislative achievements; participants in her Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service; and courageous candidates who throw their hats in the ring.

She was kind, caring and highly intelligent. She listened. She spoke up. She DID.

Olene has inspired generations of Utahns because she lived up to her own aspirations - - and more.

Thank you Myron; Olene and Myron's children; and your entire family for unselfishly sharing Olene with us.