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Mary K. Shell: Beloved, trailblazing former mayor dies at 91

By ROBERT PRICE rprice@bakersfield.com Jun 14, 2018



Mary K. Shell, in 2014.

Henry A. Barrios / The Californian

She once declared she was “no bra burner,” but Mary K. Shell, the first woman elected mayor of Bakersfield, was undeniably a pioneer, opening doors for women in politics and journalism over the course of a long and acclaimed career in public service. The civic icon died at home Thursday morning, her son Geoff Hosking and her three dogs at her side. She was 91.

Shell, who served three terms on the Kern County Board of Supervisors following her single term as mayor, 1981-85, was an East Bakersfield High School graduate, a wartime cub reporter for The Californian and later the paper's Sacramento bureau columnist. A Republican Party activist, she

was married 38 years to former Assemblyman and gubernatorial candidate Joe Shell.

She had been in failing health for the past two weeks.

Shell is the second former Bakersfield mayor to have died in the past 30 days, following Harvey L. Hall, the longest serving mayor in the city's history, who died May 19 at 77.

"She was a trailblazer and an exemplary role model," said Bakersfield Mayor Karen Goh, the second woman, after Shell, to serve as the city's mayor. "She came to my installation (as mayor in January 2017) and gave me her gavel, and it serves as a reminder of what she told me that day: 'Serve the people.'"

Shell, a Bakersfield native who friends knew as "Miki" (the kids in her Alta Vista neighborhood abbreviated Mary Katherine to "May-Kay" and eventually "Miki"), did not originally aspire to political office, though she worked to help several men achieve it. Yet, for a substantial portion of her life, people looked to Shell for direction, insight and action. She delivered.

"When she saw something she didn't like, she did something about it," said son Geoff.

Shell lived, in her own words, "several lives:" wife, mother, newspaper reporter, political activist, political columnist, mayor, county supervisor and respected elder stateswoman. Despite personal tragedies, nationally televised insults to her city and misguided murmurs about the potential for puppeteering by her politically savvy husband, she held steady as a local political icon for decades.

Her roots in Bakersfield were deep.

Shell's grandfather, Harris E. Jaynes, came to Bakersfield in about 1900 to work as a welder for Southern Pacific. He later opened a welding shop that evolved into H.E. Jaynes & Son, an automotive repair shop at 2301 Chester Ave. Shell's father, Walter Jaynes, eventually became the proprietor along with partner Dick Strickland.

Mary Katherine Jaynes, named for her mother, was born Feb. 9, 1927; she was the younger of two daughters.

Her friends cited "Little Orphan Annie" and "Jack Armstrong" as their favorite radio programs; Mary, then 9, announced hers was "the news." She was editor of the student newspaper at Washington Junior High School and editor of The Kernal at East Bakersfield High, as well as a songleader and

student body government secretary.

From the age of 11, Shell worked during holidays and summer breaks at the Chester Avenue automotive shop, wading right in alongside mechanics in white workcoats, counting armatures and gaskets. She was masking the hood of a Buick, in preparation for a new paint job, when the news came over the radio: Allied forces had landed at Normandy, France.

News aficionada

Three months later, The Californian's war-depleted newsroom needed a transfusion. Shell, 17, was hired as a cub reporter for the agriculture beat; she also wrote personality profiles and home-front war stories. In those days The Californian's news operation was housed in a single, huge room with neat rows of desks lined up classroom-style. Jim Day, the pipe-smoking managing editor, sat facing his charges like a school headmaster.

The young reporter quickly found out when, where and how the city's important decisions were made: over lunch at the Hotel El Tejon. These were the days predating the Ralph M. Brown Act, which essentially dictates that public business shall be conducted in public, and with public input.

But in 1944 it went like this: Mayor Alfred Siemon would sit down to lunch in the luxurious, sunken, Spanish-tiled dining room of the El Tejon (where downtown Bakersfield's Bank of America building now stands) just a few white tablecloths down from flamboyant attorney Morris Chain and other assorted business leaders. Seated with three or four city councilmen, Shell was convinced, Siemon would hash out city business over veal cutlets and chicken-fried steaks.

Every day, as the newspaper staff's 10:30 a.m. deadline approached, city editor Ralph Kreiser appeared over Shell's shoulder. "Come on, come on, come on," he urged as she typed in her story's final lines. She stayed a year.

Political organizer

Shell went back to school at Bakersfield College but continued to write on a "stringer" basis for The Californian. In 1946 she quit BC a semester shy of graduation to work at what is now Meadows Field. A year later, she took a job as a secretary for Skyway Associates at the old La Cresta Airfield, earning her pilot's license in exchange for her labor at age 19.

In August 1948, recently divorced from Don Stickler, to whom she had been wed three years, she married Richard Hosking and moved with him to the San Jose area. He attended law school at Santa Clara University and she worked at the San Jose Municipal Airport, among other jobs. When the couple returned to Bakersfield in 1949, Shell worked at Calcot Ltd., the cotton growers' cooperative, as an executive secretary.

Her first child, Geoffrey Richard Hosking, was born in August 1951. Then came Timothy William Hosking, born in October 1952, and Meredith Katherine Hosking, born in October 1959. For the next 15 years, Shell devoted much of her time to raising children and volunteering for Republican Party causes.

Joe Shell, a state assemblyman from the Wilshire district of Los Angeles, knew Bakersfield well, having piloted planes into the city for years for periodic flyover inspections of his drilling rigs. The husband- and wife-to-be, however, didn't get to know each other well until 1960, when Mary, who had helped found Bakersfield Republican Women Federated a few years before, was working with the late William H. Park registering new Republican Party voters in Kern County. Their success got the attention of party leaders up and down California, including that of Joe Shell.

"They had reorganized a county which was known as a bastion of Democratic politics," Joe Shell said in a 1996 interview. "It was a beautiful model for others to follow around the state."

Joe Shell's political win-loss record was almost as good as Mary's came to be: A World War II Navy pilot and captain of the University of Southern California's 1939 Rose Bowl-winning team, Joe Shell won five straight elections during his nine-year (1953-61) tenure.

Then, in 1962, the 44-year-old former Assembly minority leader sought the Republican nomination for governor. He chose Mary, a Republican strategist for whom he had a healthy respect, and Superior Court Judge George Brown to run his Kern County campaign.

Joe Shell had hoped Richard Nixon would be eyeing a second run at the presidency in 1964. Because of "the colossal and repeated blunders of the present administration" of Democratic President John F. Kennedy, Shell said in announcing his candidacy in July 1961, "the national and international capabilities of Dick Nixon are direly needed."

But the former vice-president, who had lost a close race to JFK just 18 months earlier, didn't bite. A few weeks after Shell entered the race, Nixon entered as well. Nixon won the state Republican primary with about 65 percent of the vote. It was all moot anyway: That fall incumbent Democratic

Gov. Edmund G. “Pat” Brown won the second of his two terms, and pundits across the country, even Nixon himself, called it the end of Nixon’s political career.

But instead, it was Shell who never sought public office again. He was a delegate to the GOP National Convention in San Francisco in 1964 — Mary also was a delegate that year — and he remained close to its nominee, Barry Goldwater, for three decades afterward.

Earlier in 1964 Joe Shell had become a lobbyist for oil interests, and he spent much of his time over the next 2- 1/2 decades in Sacramento. He remained active in state government, accepting a 1989 appointment to the Agricultural Labor Relations Board from then-Gov. George Deukmejian, a longtime confidant, but otherwise ceded the spotlight to his increasingly popular wife.

In 1965, Judy Clausen, an old acquaintance of Miki Shell’s from East High School, called and offered her a job with the twice-a-week Bakersfield News Bulletin. It had been almost 20 years since she had written a newspaper article.

Shell worked as a reporter until Clausen left her post as editor to work for The Californian; Shell took over, serving as editor until 1969.

Mary and Dick Hosking, who had separated in May 1967, were divorced in January 1969. After marrying Joe Shell a year later, she and the children moved with him to Sacramento where she eased — briefly — into the role of lobbyist’s wife. One day a reporter friend, Russ Walton, asked her if she thought perhaps The Californian would consider running his political columns on a regular basis. Mary said she’d see what she could do.

She brought a batch of Walton’s columns into the office of newspaper publisher Don Fritts, and he looked them over. Then he turned to Shell.

“Well, if you’re going back to Sacramento, why don’t you write us a column?” he asked. “I said OK,” Mary recalled in a 1996 interview. “I kind of felt like a traitor to Russ, but I said OK.”

Every Sunday for the next nine years, Shell’s column ran on The Californian’s “Perspective” page.

Mary and Joe came back to Bakersfield twice a month for a decade, and her status as a knowledgeable, pragmatic observer of public business grew steadily.

Along the way she wrote stories for Capitol News Service and the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, and won awards including the 1972 Excellence in Reporting Award from the California Trial Lawyers Association and the 1975 California Taxpayers Reporting Award for her revelations about excessive early retirement benefits for legislators.

Joe Shell had been in the oil business off and on throughout his life, and in 1978 the Shells opened a mom-and-pop business together, drilling four heavy-oil wells in Tulare County's Deer Creek oil field. Another party had already claimed the name Shell Oil Co., so the Shells made light of the coincidence and called their somewhat smaller operation Concho Petroleum. They kept the 17-degree gravity, low-output wells running until 1993. Mary learned as much or more about state environmental regulations and the tax code as she did about geology.

A three-year period of tragedy, fulfillment and more tragedy began in 1979. Son Timothy, 26, died in April 1979 after overdosing on an antidepressant. Daughter Meredith, a 22-year-old junior at UC Santa Barbara, died in October 1981 from cardiac arrhythmia linked to an adverse reaction to a prescribed medication. Dick Hosking, the children's father, a creditors'-rights attorney, died of natural causes two months later, at age 58.

Woman mayor

By late 1979, Bakersfield Mayor Don Hart had made it clear he would not seek re-election to a fourth term.

It occurred to Shell that, despite the elective-office void on her resume, she might have some of the appropriate skills for the job.

"I might have just let the idea go by," Shell said in 1996. "But Joe took an interest. He said, 'You know, you'd be a good mayor. You ought to give it a shot.'"

She also knew how campaigns worked, having walked precincts for Eisenhower, Goldwater and numerous candidates in between, including ex-husband Hosking, a Bakersfield city councilman from 1965 to 1969, and Joe Shell. She had even once written a manual on how to win an election, though she had never expected to run herself.

Mike Purdy, who with wife Laura was a friend of the Shells for 40 years, ran her campaign. "But, really and truly, Mary told me how I should do it," he said. "She and Joe were very astute politicians, in addition to being great people. If you were Republican, Democrat, independent or

nothing at all, she cared about you."

In the June 1980 primary, the closest race she was ever involved in, Shell finished second in a five-person field, coming in just 25 votes behind former Sheriff Charles Dodge. She had qualified for the fall runoff. Now she was a known commodity; dubious voters, she would say sometime later, had "realized I wasn't a bra burner."

Five months later, in a stunning reversal of political fortunes, she captured 61 percent of the vote. She had become Bakersfield's first (and, until Goh's election, only) woman mayor. On her first official day as mayor of what was then California's fastest growing city, Shell rose before dawn to get started on all the cooking and baking for her inauguration party.

As mayor, Shell placed top priorities on reaching out to the minority community, tidying up the city and trying to pump up what was widely viewed as flagging civic self-esteem.

"I tried to get Johnny Carson to come here and see for himself," Shell once said of the comedian who often made sport of Bakersfield's alleged shortcomings. "He never made it."

As mayor, Shell established a city beautification committee, created a city flag and, with the help of downtown businesses, helped re-establish the then-dormant downtown Christmas parade.

But she became increasingly frustrated with the mayor's largely ceremonial role. Except in rare cases when a tie-breaking vote was required, she had influence but no official say in city business. In her last City Council meeting as mayor, she urged that the city charter be amended to make the mayor's job a full-time position with a doubled salary and a vote on the council. It never happened.

County supervisor

When 5th District Supervisor John Mitchell decided not to seek re-election in 1984, Shell set her sights on the seat. In an apparent endorsement of her hands-on approach as mayor to the problems affecting poverty-blighted southeast Bakersfield, she outpolled Richard Ybarra 52.4 percent to 47.5 percent to earn the right to represent the district's heavily black and Hispanic constituency.

As before, when she ran for mayor, Shell faced initial questions about political independence from her husband.

She quickly made those concerns laughable, establishing a reputation as a politician with a talent for reducing multi-faceted dilemmas to their most basic components.

"It seems to me ..." Shell would say, after arguments from all sides had been heard, and invariably she would suggest a course of action for the board or its staff.

She also became known as an unwavering opponent of heavy-handed government overregulation, of giving over farmland to ill-conceived development and, most notably and fervently, of wasting taxpayers' money.

Running unopposed, she won re-election in 1988. And in 1992, with her reapportioned district even more predominantly Hispanic than before — it now included Arvin and Lamont, where Democrats outnumbered Republicans 4-to-1 — she won a third term, capturing 61.2 percent of the vote against Ray Gonzales and another candidate.

"She never really carried a campaign fund, but when she announced (a run for office), the next day there'd be all this money," former county supervisor Gene Tackett said. "She had such a good name."

She hosted early-morning talk-back sessions with 5th District farmers, arriving at meeting sites half an hour early to set out doughnuts and make coffee.

She would put on a straw hat, boots and overalls and get busy with local residents cleaning up litter-strewn lots.

And the people loved her for it.

"Speaking as a Democrat, if every Republican were like her, I'd --- well, I wouldn't change parties but I would sure think about it," Tackett said. "She had that way about her.

"With apologies to Harvey Hall, she was 'unity in the community' before it was a term," Tackett said. "I don't remember Democrats giving her a hard time. She was just loved by all."

Shell retired from the board in 1996 at age 69 and for a time considered a run for the 15th District state Senate seat in 1998. In the end she decided against it, easing instead into the role she seems to have been born to: Beloved institution.

"She loved Bakersfield," Purdy said, "and Bakersfield loved her."

In addition to son Geoff Hosking of Porterville, Shell is survived by stepchildren Diane and Paul Morton of Dana Point; Barbara and Harry Stone of Fullerton; David Shell of Elk Grove; Joey Shell of Marina Del Rey; Lynn Shell of Porterville; Harold and Pat Shell of San Ramon; and 10 grandchildren.

She also leaves behind Annie, a Chihuahua; Jasmine, a mixed breed; and Bradley, a poodle-terrier mix.

Funeral services will be held Thursday, June 21, at Saint Francis of Assisi Parish. The service will begin with a rosary at 10 a.m., followed by a funeral mass at 10:30 a.m. A reception follows immediately in the church's adjacent parish hall.

Graveside services will take place at Hillcrest Memorial Park, 9101 Kern Canyon Road in east Bakersfield, at about 2 p.m., depending on the length of the earlier reception.

Saint Francis is located at 900 H Street in central Bakersfield.

MORE INFORMATION

