

# Lady Lawmakers

*Women make advances in Idaho politics*

**By Sherry Squires**

**K**itty Gurnsey remembers a lot of doors being slammed in her face en route to her career in the Idaho Legislature.

The Boise Republican made her first bid for office in 1974 and went on to chair the powerful House Appropriations Committee during her 22 years in the

Legislature.

One of only a handful of women on the ballot that year, Gurnsey recalls the perils of her first campaign.

"I knocked on doors and women said they wouldn't vote for me because a woman's place was in the home," Gurnsey says.

That reaction may seem surprising in a state that opened its political doors to women early on. Idaho was the fourth state to give women the right to vote. That occurred in 1896, long before national suffrage. This year Idaho celebrates the 100th anniversary of the state's first female legislators. And the state's political history is filled with lively women who commanded active roles in government.



But it has been the past 25 years, since about the time Gurnsey entered the Legislature, that have marked the most significant gains for women in the Idaho political arena, say political observers.

For the past decade, Idaho has been among the top 10 states in terms of the percentage of women serving in the state Legislature, averaging as high as 30 percent.

While roughly one in four Idaho legislators this year is a woman, half of the representatives from Ada County are women. Women also hold the majority on the Boise City Council and have staked a claim in other local governments across the state.

On the national level, one of the state's four representatives to the federal government — Republican Rep. Helen Chenoweth — is female.

Idaho and other Western states are on the forefront of a national movement by women to gain elective office. The recent gains in Idaho signal a natural progression from small local government posts to more far-reaching roles, says Boise State political science professor Gary Moncrief.

“It’s true not just for women, but any group that has been left out of the political system,” Moncrief says. “They must build, and that takes time.”

It will take time for women to break through the “glass ceiling” that still exists, Moncrief says. Idaho has yet to elect a fe-

male governor, and few female legislators have gone on to higher statewide posts. But women have certainly progressed to those positions in other states, Moncrief says, noting that several states today have women governors.

Still, Idaho women have made tremendous strides in what amounts to one generation. Moncrief says that women often used to lose to men in legislative elections. But now, at least at the local and state legislative levels, women win as often as men when they run for an open seat.

Today’s female politicians need only to read Idaho history to find plenty of role

models. Boise-area historian and Boise State graduate Susan Stacy says women have been working in the political trenches for more than a century.

Some wrote bills and got their husbands to introduce them in the Legislature before women could do so.

Other women championed issues quite publicly. Nora Davis, who represented Gem County in the Legislature from 1942 to 1960, sponsored and carried bills that allowed women to serve on juries, removed the word “illegitimate” from children’s birth certificates, required that children stay in school until a certain age, prohibited children from buying alcohol and required that milk be transported from dairies in covered containers.

Idaho’s first female representative to Congress, Gracie Pfof, was elected as a Democrat from Canyon County in a Republican landslide year, 1952, when Dwight Eisenhower took the presidency. She was known for promoting education and family issues.

Today, women are involved in greater numbers, and their voices



*Kitty Gurnsey has seen significant gains by women in Idaho politics.*

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO



*Boise State graduate Celia Gould has represented the Buhl area for a dozen years.*

CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

are being heard on all issues.

But it's difficult to determine what they bring to the table as a group.

Like virtually every other demographic group, women hold a wide range of views and do not always vote as a bloc. Therefore, their gains in numbers have not meant a specific women's agenda, Moncrief says.

Nationally, women tend to view the Democratic Party as more attuned to their concerns. Women vote Democratic in presidential elections about 10 percent more so than men, Moncrief says.

But in Idaho, one of the most conservative states in the nation, it is largely Republicans who set the agenda. That makes it difficult to recognize any kind of emerging trends or influence by women, Moncrief notes.

Republican Celia Gould has represented the Buhl area for 12 years in the Idaho House. After earning a bachelor's degree in political science in 1979 from Boise State, she worked for others in politics and then defeated two men for her legislative seat.

She says although women might be lured into the political arena by passion for one issue, they quickly meld into the routine, naturally gravitating toward issues they have the most interest in but serving in a variety of capacities.

A newly formed political action committee hopes to change that. Gracie's List, named after Pfost, is a bipartisan group that uses pro-choice as a litmus test to determine which female candidates to support.

About 50 members strong, the group hopes to unite women on issues such as child abuse, school dropout rates, education and abortion, board member Teri McColly says.

"Women are consensus builders," McColly says. "They tend to see the broader picture."

Former state Sen. Sue Reents, a Democrat from Boise, helped form the group after leaving office in 1996. Now a candidate for lieutenant governor — a position never held by a woman in Idaho — she believes female candidates will need a more formal support system if they are to continue to climb the political ladder to statewide and congressional seats.

United by a belief that this past year's Legislature got sidetracked by the abortion debate and ignored key social issues, Gracie's List is supporting its first candidates for statewide and legislative offices this fall.

"We hope Gracie's List can help move us forward but also bring us back to times when we compromised more," McColly says. "Times when children's issues didn't get pushed aside."

Gurnsey believes women will continue to become more of a force in politics.

"It's not an easy thing to do to strike out on your own and get involved," she says. "It takes an independent soul. But women just plain have to do it." □

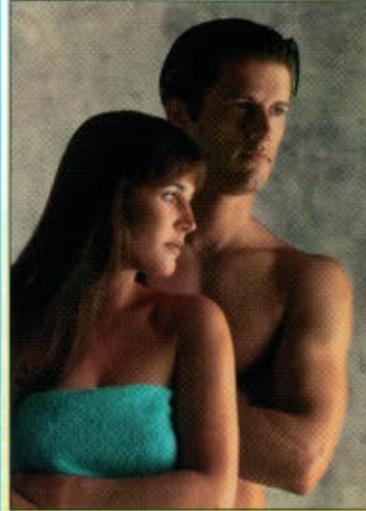


## ADA PLASTIC AND RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGERY

Specializing in Plastic Reconstructive and Cosmetic Surgery

**Thomas D McKim, M.D., F.A.C.S.**

Fellow American College of Surgeons • Diplomate of American Board of Surgery



- Cosmetic Facial Surgery
  - Ultra Pulse CO2 Laser,  
(removes wrinkles, acne scars & tightens skin)
  - Endoscopic Facial Surgery (Minimal Scars)
  - Ear and Nose Reshaping
  - Breast Enlargement, Reduction & Reconstruction
  - Ultrasonic Liposculpture
  - Laser Hair Removal
- 
- Complete Skin Care Center
  - Courtesy Staff Consultation
  - Full Surgical Facility with Licensed Anesthetist

for an appointment

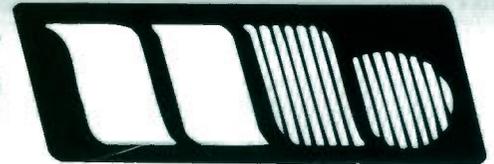
**367-6901**

If no answer call 338-7773

999 North Curtis Rd, Suite 404, Boise  
1998 Moving to 900 N. Liberty, Boise

**"We at Wright Brothers, are proud to  
support 25 Years of Bronco Athletics."**

P.O. Box 637  
Eagle, Idaho 83616  
(208) 939-0377



**WRIGHT BROTHERS**  
THE BUILDING COMPANY

**Build the Log Home of Your Dreams**

*~ More Choices with 5 Log Styles ~*

- Quality Craftsmanship
- Custom Designs
- Lifetime Warranty
- 20 Years of Integrity

**1(800) 788-4468**

Independently Distributed By:  
Custom Cedars of Idaho

**Boise**  
2223 W. Airport Way,  
Boise ID 83705  
(208)336-3122

**McCall**  
502 N. 3rd, Ste. 124,  
McCall ID 83638  
(208)634-3222

