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Mayor Helen Boosalis

My Mother's Life in Politics

By Beth Boosalis Davis

August 2008

552 pages | 6 x 9 | 55 photographs, appendix, index

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Book Synopsis:

A daughter's recounting of her mother's political career.

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University of Nebraska Press



Book Description

As a 1950s housewife and League of Women Voters volunteer who spearheaded the city of Lincoln's switch to a "strong mayor" form of government, Helen Boosalis never anticipated that she herself would one day be that strong mayor and chief executive of Nebraska's capital city.

Helen Boosalis's story, told by her daughter, Beth Boosalis Davis, is the story of a true pioneer of women in politics. The daughter of Greek immigrants, Boosalis achieved national prominence as the first woman president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and as an outspoken advocate for economically distressed cities facing President Reagan's "new federalism." Winning the Democratic nomination for governor of Nebraska in 1986, Helen Boosalis ran against Kay Orr in the first gubernatorial contest between two women in U.S. history. The interwoven tales of conflict and challenge, from the mayor's office to the campaign trail, combine personal insight into one woman's trailblazing political history with a compelling memoir of a half century of public service and private devotion shared by two remarkable women.

Pre-Publication Praise for *Mayor Helen Boosalis*

"The story of Helen Boosalis is the story of American democracy at its best—a daughter of Greek immigrants who became one of the nation's best mayors and barely missed becoming the governor of Nebraska. Her life stands as a testament to the enduring strength of a country that has not only welcomed its immigrants, it has opened its political system to us and invited us to serve and lead."—Michael Dukakis, former governor of Massachusetts

"In a well-researched, respectful, and loving narrative, Davis tells the story of a remarkable political and social leader. Yet, I most relished the story of a magnificent mother-daughter relationship across the decades."—Mary Pipher, best-selling author of *Reviving Ophelia* and *Writing to Change the World*

Post-Publication Praise

Please visit this book's [Web page](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Mayor-Helen-Boosalis,673947.aspx) (<http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/product/Mayor-Helen-Boosalis,673947.aspx>) for the most current post-publication praise.



Author Biography



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Beth Boosalis Davis graduated magna cum laude from Carleton College with a major in English. After receiving her law degree from the University of Chicago Law School, she joined the Chicago law firm of Schiff Hardin & Waite where her general corporate practice included real estate, municipal law, corporate finance and litigation; she subsequently served as Deputy Chief Counsel of the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Following her public and private law practice, Davis was elected to three terms as third ward alderman on the Evanston City Council where she chaired the Human Services Committee and helped lead expansion of the city's economic development strategy. More recently, Davis was executive director of the National Lekotek Center, a nonprofit organization with a national network of program centers providing services for children with disabilities and their families.

Currently, Davis serves on the boards of Carleton College, where she chaired the student life committee and served on the presidential search committee; Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where she serves on the executive committee and chaired the First Look Council for new play development; and First Bank & Trust, where she chairs the audit committee.

She has been a volunteer and leader on numerous boards and commissions throughout her career, including board member of the National League of Cities and chair of its Human Development Policy Steering Committee; president of the national Women in Municipal Government; advisor to the President's National Commission on America's Urban Families; president of the Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago; member of the boards of the Evanston Community Foundation, First United Methodist Church, and Topcorp, Inc. (Evanston /Northwestern University Research Park); founding director of the Teen Parent Services Network; and member of the ABA Commission on Mental and Physical Disability Law.

Beth and her husband, Max, live in Evanston, Illinois, and have two grown sons who live in Chicago. Beth's love of theater began with her tiny role at age ten in *Inherit the Wind* at the Lincoln Community Playhouse. She enjoys movies most weekends and tries to beat Max in their annual Oscar contest. Her thirty-year-old book group finally tackled *War and Peace* in 2008 and most survived. A two-block walk from her house, Lake Michigan affords moments of serenity and beauty, although Beth still misses the Nebraska plains.



The Story Behind the Book

By **Beth Boosalis Davis**

Grabbing for the brass ring on a carousel or merry-go-round is no longer a familiar endeavor, and only a few existing carousels even sport brass ring dispensers today. But what is familiar to most of us is the concept of reaching for the brass ring—the highest prize; we somehow know that timing and dexterity are required to succeed in grabbing the ring as the carousel neither slows nor stops but continues to rotate. Most of us will face at least one brass ring moment in our lives.

My mother made her decision to run for mayor of Lincoln, Nebraska’s capital city, shortly after sharing a cab ride with a young man who was attending a meeting with her in Washington DC in early 1975. During their ride, she spoke of her doubts about entering the mayor’s race. Although she had served for many years on the city council, she had been one member of a legislative body—far different than being the sole chief executive—and she wasn’t sure she was ready to take on the city’s top elected spot. More than thirty years later, Mom remembers her DC colleague’s encouragement to go for it. “Sometimes the brass ring on the merry-go-round comes around only once,” he told her. “You have one chance to grab it and then it’s gone.”

My mother did, indeed, successfully grab the ring and was elected Lincoln’s first woman mayor in May 1975. I know the brass ring metaphor must have come to mind more than once as she was presented with challenges of governing in most difficult economic times as well as with opportunities she had never anticipated, such as her leadership of mayors nationwide as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Toward the end of her second term as mayor, she passed on to me the same grab-for-the-brass-ring advice that had served her so well. I was on the verge of rejecting a chance to run for the Evanston City Council because I wasn’t sure I was ready and besides, I had a demanding job and a two-year-old. Mom’s message—“the brass ring may not come round again”—propelled my decision to run for city council and ultimately to experience a fascinating decade in elected office.

While my mother and I applied the brass ring lesson to specific political decision points in our lives, I have now internalized the message and sometimes apply it even unknowingly to other aspects of my life. Writing a book about my mother’s political life is the most recent case in point. The idea to write the book came to me in the middle of a bout of flu. I was so sick I couldn’t read or even watch television. As I lay in bed amidst uncharacteristic quiet and solitude, the out-of-the-blue idea to write a book about my mother hit me with such force and clarity that I didn’t even question my ability to do it. When I recovered, however, practical considerations bubbled up, such as the fact that I had never written a book and knew nothing of what was involved. I remember thinking that it was intriguing but my lack of preparation and the less-than-optimal timing in my life surely relegated the notion to its appropriate spot among other back-burner projects – just another something I might do someday.

That’s when my internalized familiarity with brass rings kicked in. It was not that I precipitously decided to write a book and get it published—after all, the decisions of too many others are required for that to happen. What I did do is commit to a course of action that would move me closer to realizing the compelling possibility of doing a book that popped up when I wasn’t looking and wasn’t ready. I determined how to deal with my job and work schedule; I took writing workshops, read books on writing, started journaling, outlining, researching. It took me years.

But what I didn’t do was just wait for the brass ring to come around again.



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Discussion Questions

1. The author tells the story of her mother's life in politics using a nonlinear sequence, alternating "flash forwards" from the 1986 Nebraska governor's race with earlier points along her mother's political path. Why did the author choose this structure for her narrative? How might a linear sequence change the story's effect on readers?
2. Unlike most biographers, the author shared her subject's political life both as a daughter and as an elected city official in her own right. How did those perspectives affect her telling of the story? Which perspective had a greater influence on the author's story?
3. Is the book primarily a memoir or biography? Which book elements support each category?
4. Most of the book's narrative takes place decades ago. What makes it historically significant? Of what current significance is the story of Helen Boosalis?
5. Why is Nebraska an unexpected and/or appropriate setting for the journey of this woman political pioneer?
6. What external factors and internal qualities explain the leadership of Helen Boosalis? of other compelling leaders?
7. What did the book illuminate about political campaigns? campaign financing? political advertising? media coverage? polls?
8. How did Helen's Greek-American "Roots" affect her later political life?
9. Helen dismissed gender as a factor in her elections to office. Was that an accurate assessment? How have voters' attitudes toward women candidates changed since the 1950's? the 1970's? What role does a candidate's gender play in today's political campaigns?
10. How did Helen benefit from or contribute to the goals of historic women's movements?
11. Helen first accepted, then wrestled with expectations of her as a "superwoman." How does the superwoman myth apply to women today? has it died? changed form?
12. How important was Mike's support in his wife's political success? Does the role of political spouse differ for men and women?
13. What is most surprising about the book's description of governing/leadership at the municipal level? How does it compare with what we know about state and federal levels of government?
14. Several people observed that Helen's public persona was no different than her private persona. What did they mean? How does that observation relate to her roles as homemaker, councilmember, mother, mayor, wife, national leader, volunteer, grandmother, gubernatorial candidate?
15. Why did Helen Boosalis resist being called a role model? What is meant by that term? Is she a role model? What is her lasting legacy?



Additional Information

Events

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