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An unexpected leader, my friend and mentor, Donna M. Jones

By Idaho State Controller Brandon Woolf

In every generation, an unexpected leader arises. The Silent Generation, comprised of Americans born pre-World War II in the aftermath of the Great Depression, came of age in the 1950s. They ushered in the Civil Rights Movement, invented rock and roll, and both believed and lived the American Dream that with hard work and perseverance anything is possible.

For Idaho, Donna M. Jones is the Silent Generation's unexpected leader. She lived the American Dream to its fullest.

Donna was born on the plains of Colorado and grew up dirt poor. At 12 years old her family moved to Idaho so her older brother could attend college. Donna married young, had three children and alongside her husband Don, who passed away in 2000, worked hard.

By 1959 she rose to management for the Party Plan Jewelry Company. In 1967 Donna and Don purchased Payette's NAPA Auto Parts franchise and opened another store in New Plymouth by 1976. Donna, a scant five feet tall, worked behind the parts counter at both stores – an unexpected place to find a woman in the 1960s and '70s.

Donna also sold real estate in Idaho and Oregon throughout the 1980s and '90s, successfully, having brokerage licenses in both states. At the turn of the century, she served as Executive Director of the Idaho Real Estate Commission for six years.

At a time when women had limited opportunities she had a family, a career, was an entrepreneur, and was a pioneer for women in politics.

Iconic Democratic Governor Cecil Andrus appointed Donna, a lifelong Republican, to serve in the Idaho Legislature in 1987.

In 1997 then-Speaker of the Idaho House of Representatives and now Congressman Mike Simpson tapped Donna to chair the powerful House Revenue and Taxation Committee, a first for an Idaho woman.

She became Idaho's 20th State Controller and the first woman to hold this statewide constitutional elected office in 2006.

Donna looked beyond glass ceilings, shattering through them.

She was also my mentor.

Donna was fearless. During the economic downturn of 2008, she was pressured by powerful Republicans to refund a significant deposit to a well-connected individual who had defaulted on a contract through her role on the Land Board. Despite being pressured to do otherwise, Donna would cast a politically unpopular vote because it was the right thing to do for the beneficiaries, even if it may cost her the next election.

Honest. Steady. Loyal. True to principles. That's Donna Jones.

After Donna's severe car crash in 2012, and my subsequent appointment to fulfill the remainder of her term by her good friend and then-Governor Butch Otter, Donna would follow the path of her idol, the man who inspired her political life, President Ronald Reagan.

Concluding his life of public service Reagan said, "I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life. I know that for America there will always be a bright dawn ahead." Although Alzheimer's erased Donna's own memories of her life, our memories of her shine, and she will never be forgotten. Donna made a difference in my life not only as a friend but as a mentor. Since taking office, I have tried to embody her spirit, fearlessness, and passion for doing what is right - even when it was not easy - every single day.

Donna passed away peacefully in her sleep on July 8, 2022. Her family invites her friends to join them at a celebration of life at the Elks Lodge in Ontario, Oregon, at 3 pm on August 13th.

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