

Lucille Pattison, Woman of the Year 1980



In 1973, Lucille Pattison was the only woman elected to serve on the Dutchess County Legislature, which was comprised of thirty-five members. She was also the first Democrat elected to a county-wide office in Dutchess County since 1906. As she stood in the back of the County Courthouse in Poughkeepsie, New York waiting to be introduced and sworn in, a gentleman said, “Well, you will be getting a lot of attention.” “It’s not their attention I want,” replied Ms. Pattison, “it’s their respect!” As she went on to make even more political history, Lucille Pattison earned the respect, and the attention of people throughout the country.

Born in Rochester, New York, in 1935, Ms. Pattison grew up on a fruit farm, which her mother managed. Lucille, her brother, and her Grandfather worked long hard hours and lived on a meager income on the farm. Although no one in her family had attended college, when Lucille was a child the 6:00 o’clock news was on the radio every night during dinner, accompanied by lively political debates between her father and grandfather. They listened to news of WWII and the Korean War and energetically expressed strong opinions about President Roosevelt and other political figures. Since Ms. Pattison’s mother was Canadian born, the news at 7:00PM was from the CBC, and that generated more talk of world events.

Lucille’s exposure to world events through radio and family discussions, combined with her experience with farm labor, motivated her to be the first in her family to pursue an education beyond high school. A married couple in the neighborhood, who recognized something special in this young girl, encouraged her to attend Syracuse University. Considering her childhood dinner table conversations, it is little wonder that Lucille Pattison would study history and political science at Syracuse. A bit of foreshadowing had occurred when she was a junior in high school. She was selected for a debate program called, “Junior Town Meeting on the Air”, and as the debate team was searching for a topic Lucille suggested discussing whether the ceiling on the national debt should be raised or remain the same! “I’m not sure most of the students knew what I was talking about,” Ms. Pattison laughingly recalled.

After Syracuse University, Lucille’s first job was teaching history in a Rochester high school. “I knew that teaching was never going to be my career, though. I didn’t know what it was going to be, but I was never satisfied with myself as a teacher. It’s too difficult to know what to leave out of the curriculum, when you teach history. I thought everything was important.” When a career opportunity arose for her husband in 1964, the family moved to Hyde Park, New York, where Ross began a long and distinguished career at Dutchess Community College.

In their new home, the Pattison's began a family and Lucille became involved in political campaigns and the League of Women Voters. Ross Pattison served on the Dutchess County Democratic Committee, and in 1973 when a vacancy arose on the County Legislature, they asked him to run for office. He declined the opportunity, so the Committee turned to Lucille and said, "Then, what about you?" After discussing the offer with her husband and some key women in the League of Women Voters, she decided to run for the all male, Republican dominated legislature. As Ross pointed out, "You are doing so much of this political work, anyway, you might as well get paid a little bit for it !" At that time, the Pattisons had three daughters, ages three, four, and seven. With much help from her family and friends, Lucille launched her campaign and was elected to the position. But serving as a legislator was just the beginning.

Within three years, in 1976, Ms. Pattison was elected Democratic Majority Leader of the Legislature; an incredible feat in the Republican stronghold of Dutchess County. In fact, the Democrats would not be in the majority again until 2008. "I didn't have any problems being a woman on the Legislature," Ms. Pattison stated, "it was the men who had problems with my being there. Initially, it took me about two months to earn their respect. I was involved from the outset. I think my years of participation with the League of Women Voters gave me the confidence and the experience to assert myself."

Two years later, the Dutchess County Executive, a Republican, was arrested for bribery and resigned from his post in April of 1978. The election was coming up in November, and it was clear the voters were ready for a change in direction and some honest, innovative leadership. "Like Watergate," Ms. Pattison stated, "it takes something like that to get the electorate really involved." So, Lucille Pattison ran for the highest position in county government.

Because of her hard work and her refusal to acknowledge gender bias as a deterrent, Lucille made history again on November 8, 1978, when she was elected the first female, Democratic County Executive in the United States. Her decision to run had been based on the total support of her husband and on the friends, neighbors, and constituents who not only again helped her to run a successful campaign, but also helped with responsibilities at home. Ms. Pattison said, simply and sincerely, "I just could not have done it without the support of my husband." Her role model in politics was Anne Buchholz, another female politician in Poughkeepsie, a rarity in those days.

On her first day of work at the County Office Building in Poughkeepsie, women crowded around the windows and watched with pride, as the first female County Executive get out of her car and came in to her office. Most likely, many of those employees had experienced the sexism which was typical of that time period. "All of the 'firsts' I had achieved as a woman were irrelevant to me, at the time. It took me several years to realize the impact on women of what I had done. But I do remember how excited those ladies were as they stood at the windows on my first day of work. "

In that first year in office, Ms. Pattison had to address the myriad problems brought about by her predecessor's corruption. So, in her typical fashion, the new County Executive took charge and addressed the issues head-on. "At the end of each day, I knew I had accomplished something," Ms. Pattison said recently about her career. "I had a wonderful staff, and we worked long, hard hours, but we were surefooted. We knew what we were doing, as women often do." Although the Republicans thought she was a "usurper" and that things would soon be "back to business as usual," Lucille Pattison continued to be re-elected and ultimately served as County Executive for a total of thirteen years. She opted not to run for re-election in 1991.

The list of awards and recognitions received by Lucille Pattison is extensive, and she is too modest to discuss them. To name just two, she was selected to be the 1980 Woman of the Year by the Poughkeepsie Branch of The American Association of University Women, and she proudly wears the Eleanor Roosevelt

–Valkill Medal which was awarded to her in 1994. Both of these distinguished honors were based on her advocacy for children, families, and the poor while she was in office.

Throughout those years as a legislator and a County Executive, Ms. Pattison and her husband were raising their three children. She was determined not to bring the issues of the job home, but it was impossible to protect her girls completely. “I expected and dealt with confrontation as County Executive,” Ms. Pattison said, “but it was hard for my family to hear me criticized on the radio or in the press.” Generally speaking, however, her daughters were unimpressed with their mother’s notoriety. When asked what it was like to have such a prominent mother, they would say, “Oh, she gets up every morning, takes a shower, lays out our school clothes, and gives us chores to do. She’s just a working Mom.” And that is exactly the way Lucille wanted it to be.

Over the course of her career, Lucille Pattison met such notables as Jackie Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, Prince Phillip, and the Governors and politicians of New York State; but it is a woman with no college education whom she credits for modeling the management skills and determination needed to run a county. “Although she died when I was quite young, I realize now that my mother was an unusual woman. She was the first elder in the history of her Presbyterian Church, and was a Sunday School teacher. She also ran the family farm. She was a very strong person; strong willed and very involved. As news of my various professional accomplishments reached home to Rochester, a friend said, ‘Of course Lucille can do that, because of her mother!’ I regret that she never lived long enough to even see me get married,” Ms. Pattison reflected quietly.

Lucille Pattison was the Poughkeepsie Branch of the American Association of University Women Woman of the Year in 1980.

Written by Judy Linville for AAUW Poughkeepsie Branch

Sources

Pattison, Lucille. Oral History Interview with Judy Linville
January 28, 2008.

Poughkeepsie Journal. Archives 1973-1991.