

For a Better Arlington: How Elizabeth Weihe's Civic Leadership Improved The County

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April 28, 2020

Originally born in Kentucky on December 12, 1914, the story of Elizabeth Blaylock Weihe's legacy as a civic leader in Arlington began at the start of the postwar period after World War II when she moved to the Washington, D.C. area in 1946.¹ Her husband, Vernon I. Weihe, an avionic consultant and Army Air Forces civilian engineer who worked on aircraft navigation and communications equipment, had taken a job in the area with Air Transport Association as a systems engineer.² The couple raised their three children in the area: Judith de Tessieres, Dean Weihe, a highly decorated fighter pilot who served in Vietnam³, and Theodore (Ted) Weihe who later went on to take a leadership role within the Yorktown Civic Association⁴.

One of Elizabeth Weihe's most lasting contributions to Arlington County was her role in the desegregation of Arlington County Schools. During the earlier part of the 20th century, Arlington, Virginia lived under segregation, much like all of the other southern states. Even after Hoffman-Boston Junior High School, the first secondary public school available to students of color within Arlington County, was opened in 1932, many problems were still evident. Everyday kids of parents such as Phyllis Costley were forced to pass by other high quality schools located

¹McCaffrey, Scott. "Elizabeth Weihe: A century's journey from mom to activist to Arlington icon." *InsideNoVa*, 7 Nov. 2014, www.insidenova.com/news/arlington/elizabeth-weihe-a-century-s-journey-from-mom-to-activist/article_74137226-667f-11e4-9930-9f0583b6aaa8.html.

² "Vernon I. Weihe." *Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum*, airandspace.si.edu/support/wall-of-honor/vernon-i-weihe.

³ "CPT Dean Vernon Weihe, Sr." *Find a Grave*, www.findagrave.com/memorial/138442435/dean-vernon-weihe.

⁴ "History of the Yorktown Civic Association." *Yorktown Civic Association*, yorktowncivic.org/history/.

nearer to their homes such as Washington-Lee in order to get to their own designated school, Hoffman-Boston, located farther away⁵. Parents such as Welbe Peggy Deskins were concerned not just about integration, but “about getting the best teaching, the best grades, the best schooling” for their children. Evelyn Syphax, a teacher at Hoffman-Boston, describes the school’s books as “discards from the white children”. She explained that white helping teachers were also prohibited, causing students of Hoffman-Boston to miss out on classes such as art, music, physical ed, reading, and speech. Overall, the school was just not up to par with the schools white children in the area attended. Then on May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court banned segregation in public schools in the famous case *Brown v. Board of Education*. In response, a program known as “Massive Resistance”, which essentially tried to block the desegregation of Virginia’s schools by going as far as to shut down public schools, was drawn up.⁶ Weihe described hearing about massive resistance as “a very difficult thing for those living in Arlington who were beginning to see our schools improved”. In the 1940s, many had moved to Arlington from the north because of all the federal growth in Washington, populating Arlington with many whites who prioritized education over segregation and came to be known as racial moderates. These racial moderates were not pleased with the prospect of the public school system being shut down. Aware of Virginia’s political climate at the time, leaders of what came to be known as the Arlington Committee to Preserve Public school such as Elizabeth Weihe angled their focal point

⁵ *It's Just Me...The Integration of the Arlington Public Schools*. Produced by John Stuhldreher, performance by Welbe Peggy Deskins, Jim Stockard, Evelyn Syphax, and Elizabeth Weihe, Arlington Educational Television, 2001. *Youtube*, youtu.be/OtKtqbrbbQg.

⁶ "The Story of Arlington Public School Desegregation." *Arlington Public Library*, 11 Jan. 2018, library.arlingtonva.us/2018/01/11/the-desegregation-of-arlington-public-schools/.

toward saving the public schools in order to attract the support of people of differing political backgrounds. And it worked. They managed to attract four thousand members within two weeks. The committee exerted pressure on politicians in power to keep schools open and made the integral part of Massive Resistance, closing schools, seem like a drastic option. The committee's pressure combined with years of court action by the NAACP took effect in 1959. Elizabeth Weihe's role in this story not only played out through her membership in the committee, but also through the League of Women Voters of Arlington, an organization who supported integration, as she was one of 4 members who spoke before the County Board to urge desegregation. On January 19, 1959 Virginia's Supreme Court found massive resistance to violate both the State and Federal Constitutions. On February 2, 1959, Gloria Thompson, Lance Newman, Michael Jones, and Ronald Deskins entered Stratford High school, and were the first students to end the segregation of Arlington County Public Schools.

The lasting impact of the desegregation of Stratford High School cannot be understated. Arlington was the first county to desegregate in all of Virginia. During a time in which the rest of Virginia was insistent on remaining segregated, Elizabeth Weihe was one of many Arlingtonians who persevered in the fight for equal opportunity. While far from complete integration, the enrollment of these four students broke down a major racial barrier and kickstarted the process of full integration all throughout Virginia, improving education opportunities for minorities in the long run.

Weihe's impact on Arlington did not end in the 50s with the story of desegregation. Not long after the desegregation in the 50s, Weihe continued to make her mark on Arlington through her position on the Arlington County Planning Commission, which she was appointed chairman

of in the early 1960s. During Weihe's 12 years on the committee, Rosslyn and Crystal City were redeveloped, and several neighborhood conservation plans were put into place. She was also an advocate for the aesthetic aspects of planning around Arlington. However, Weihe's greatest contribution during this time was arguably the role she played in making the metro system a reality in Arlington. After other plans for mass transit in the area had failed in years before, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority approved a 98 mile Adopted Regional System (ARS) in March of 1968. The problem was that many were still opposed to the plan when they learned of the sizable cost, as a \$54 million bond issue appeared on Arlington's November 1968 ballot. Elizabeth Weihe played a huge role in gathering support for this bond which would account for the first round of funding for the metro. She urged a rail car to be brought to the parking lot of Kahn's Department Store in Virginia Square, in order to expose voters to what a Metro car would look like. Those who turned up to the event were able to get a feel for the inside of a rail car and were given more information about the metro routes. The event was a success, helping to generate approval for the metro.⁷ On November 5, 1968, more than 70% of voters voted in favor of passing the bond issue, giving Arlington County, Fairfax County, Fairfax City, and Falls Church jurisdictions the power to issue bonds annually at a rate which would keep pace with construction.⁸

The metro's addition to Arlington was pivotal in its transformation into a transit-oriented urban community. The metro helped to attract residents while decreasing traffic. It rapidly

⁷ Craft, Kevin. "When Metro Came To Town." *Arlington Magazine*, 28 Oct. 2013, www.arlingtonmagazine.com/when-metro-came-to-town/.

⁸ Curtius, Mary. "Arlington's Smart Growth Journey." *Arlington CPHD Planning*, egov.arlingtonva.us/CPHDPlanning/timeline60.htm.

urbanized areas through the redevelopment projects it stimulated along its routes.⁹ It bolstered economic growth, with both the county's median household income and area median home values increasing in the years after the metro's opening. The metro has made commuting to areas such as D.C. something to be done with ease, interconnecting the region.

One characteristic of Elizabeth Weihe which must not be overlooked was her role as a powerful, proactive female who helped pave the way for other women to hold positions of power in Arlington. One way this was exemplified was through her membership in the League of Women voters, an organization which continues to address voter education & registration as well as gerrymandering today¹⁰. She was also the first female chairman of the Arlington County Planning Commission.¹¹ In 1997, Elizabeth Weihe's influence as a female leader was recognized when she was named one of the recipients of The Arlington County Commission on the Status of Women's 1997 Persons of Vision Award. The award is presented to those from the community who exemplify dedication to female issues and have actively communicated and worked toward

⁹ Greene, David. "How One D.C. Suburb Set A Gold Standard For Commuting." *National Public Radio*, 24 Oct. 2013,

www.npr.org/2013/10/24/239138789/how-one-d-c-suburb-set-a-gold-standard-for-commuting.

¹⁰ *League of Women Voters of Arlington*. lwv-arlingtonva.org/home-1. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

¹¹ *WTOP News*. 3 Nov. 2014, wtop.com/news/2014/11/morning-notes-1069/.

realizing this vision.¹² Weihe was acknowledged as a longtime community activist and League of Women Voters member, who worked to better the schools and environment of Arlington.¹³

To sum it up, Elizabeth Weihe's influence can be seen today all throughout Arlington through our diverse public schools, metro system, and the aesthetics of planning she took into consideration. The passion she had for community activism is clear through all of the positions she held. From both Arlington's Planning and Economic Development Commissions to Arlington's Beautification Committee, Committee of 100, and Public Utilities Commission, Weihe's involvement in Arlington has changed it for the better. She is and will remain an integral part of Arlington's history.

¹² "CSW Women of Vision Awards." *Arlingtonva*, commissions.arlingtonva.us/commission-status-women/csw-awards/. Accessed 28 Apr. 2020.

¹³ Hughes, Leonard. "Honors and Awards." *The Washington Post*, 27 Mar. 1997, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/03/20/honors-and-awards/fe3c1ef4-55ff-4ee9-b5ed-04ea2a705a88/.

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