



Phyllis "Phyl" Griggs

March 7, 2024

Phyllis "Phyl" Griggs - an admired businesswoman, McAllen City Commissioner, an active volunteer, and lover of animals - passed away at her home on March 7, 2024. A resident of McAllen since 1972 she embraced the popular saying "I may not have been born in Texas but I got here as fast as I could."

She has been described as an icon, an original, a trailblazer, a force for good, a glass ceiling breaker, a mentor, a fierce animal advocate, a proud mom, and a good friend.

Born in Grand Island, Nebraska, Phyllis was the only child born to Fritz Rieger and Kathryn Lambson in August of 1937. Her father was a salesman and later an FAA inspector, hence the family moved often.

Phyllis lived in six different towns during her school years, ending with what turned out to be the final move to Rapid City, South Dakota in the early 1950s. A sickly child, Phyllis would grow into a robust and healthy adult but those years of illness - most notably rheumatic fever - kept her in bed while her friends played outside in the often chilly midwestern towns. It was during this time that she developed her love of reading and writing and fostered her active imagination and love of storytelling. (In February this year she could still recite a favorite Robert Louis Stevenson poem, Foreign Lands, which speaks

to a child's musings while bedridden.)

Shortly after graduating from high school in Rapid City, Phyllis married Norman, and they purchased a 40-acre ranch in Rapid Valley (outside of Rapid City) in 1957. Both had grown up with the western spirit and love of horses. (In fact, Phyllis was selected as Rodeo Queen in 1956 - an honor which recognizes both horsemanship and beauty of the recipient). Here, they raised cattle and horses for nearly 14 years, and a daughter for seven before deciding to part company.

During these same 14 years, Phyllis was the secretary for a construction firm in Rapid City, where she learned about business, partnerships, and dealmaking. Working with a group of men at Corner, Howe, and Lee, she honed skills that would prepare her for the role(s) of a lifetime in South Texas.

In 1972, she, her daughter, and new husband bought a house and a commercial lot in McAllen, Texas, where they planned to open a Mister Donut shop - a franchise business they had seen in South Dakota. (Phyllis had originally explored McAllen because her father had a small parcel of land in the area.)

Phyllis put the \$3,000 down payment on the house - all the money she had - and her husband put his money into the business.

Even before the shop opened, the marriage closed, yet Phyllis managed to move on despite the words from her former husband still ringing in her ears: "You're not smart enough to succeed."

With the endorsement and accolades from her former Rapid City bosses, "If Phyl says she will pay you back, you can count on her doing just that", she was able to secure a loan from local banker/hero Ernie Williams, and she, as

a single mother of an 8-year-old, began her stint as the Ms. in Mister Donut - a role she relished for nearly 30 years.

After enjoying the highest sales in the nation after only two years, the city of McAllen as well as Mister Donut national had a new darling. With early success under the belted waist of her always smart attire, she continued to build and expand, enjoying the wheeling and dealing and construction as much as she did the actual management of the donut shops. She loved her employees and could always be counted on to go the extra mile for any of them. She was smart, creative, and fierce, with a healthy dose of humor and charm - the traits that defined her in all her endeavors.

Recognition as business person of the year for the state of Texas in 1983 from the Small Business Administration and business person of the year for the Southwest region later that same year further propelled her into the spotlight.

She truly loved McAllen, and when a friend suggested a role in local politics was a natural next step, and after doing her customary research, she fully embraced the idea and served with remarkable distinction as McAllen's first female city commissioner and an outspoken advocate of the Police and Fire Departments, Parks and Recreation, a move of the Civic Center, and all things good for McAllen.

While much has been written on Phyllis' acumen for business and politics, less has been noted about her role as a loving mother. After being raised by tolerant parents who allowed "Phyl" to rule the roost, she, especially as a single mother in a still new home, decided on more active mothering complete with enforced chores and curfews (things that spoke of love), but also committed herself to active involvement in all of her daughter's activities. Over a six-year period beginning with 7th grade basketball, she attended every

single game - home and away. As the former coach noted recently, "She was a pillar of strength, support and enthusiasm," not only for her daughter but for the entire team. Many teammates even dubbed her Mama Griggs. Not only did she attend games, but occasionally drove team members to events and helped support teammates whose parents were not always able to attend. She instilled confidence and independence in her daughter as well as serving as a terrific role model.

Phyllis' life cannot be captured without a bit of discussion about animals. From an early age she demanded and was able to acquire a horse - the first of a lifetime of horses. (Another favorite childhood book, Miserable Merry Christmas is about a young boy who wanted a pony for Christmas or nothing at all. A young Phyllis, a master negotiator even then, gave the same ultimatum to her parents with a similar happy ending.)

Her McAllen homestead, Ahora Que Corral, was selected because of the accompanying barn and field - there she had Annie the horse and a few goats to keep Annie company, and then some guinea hens, some pigmy goats, and there were the BIG dogs - Slick, Bob, Chance, Chance, and finally Chance. Last but not least, there is the bird Cowboy who, with great fortune, flew into her life circa the 1990s -- a runaway who still lives happily at the Corral.

From her early days Phyllis developed a talent for, and love of, writing and storytelling. When going through her things, a pointed 1968 letter she penned to Mattel about Baby Cheryl's unacceptable baldness and the accompanying embarrassment of her four-year-old suggests her way with words extended nearly 60 years.

She was a featured contributor in The Monitor, using her column to share stories about life, insights, friends, and moments. Friends and colleagues were often recipients of thoughtful remembrances of a lost loved one or the

capturing of a special moment. She gathered all these columns into a self-published book, *Memories, Musings, and Moments*, which cannot be read without shedding a tear or gasping with laughter.

Phyllis didn't plan this life she lived so well from being a cowboy, a secretary, a storyteller, a business woman, a politician, a volunteer, a traveler, a shell seeker, a friend, and a mother. But she lived it fiercely, frankly, and fully and always on her own terms.

She will be dearly missed by her daughter, Tracy, and Tracy's partner John, and by her "perfect" dog Chance, and her parrot Cowboy. Her friends, a source of companionship and great joy over the years, mourn deeply as well.

A celebration of life will begin at 6 p.m. at the Art Village Event Center on Main Street in McAllen on Friday, March 15, 2024.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Texas Lions Camp, 4100 San Antonio Hwy, Kerrville, TX 78028.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

MAR 15. 6:00 PM (CT)

Art Village Event Center
800 N. Main St.
McAllen, TX 78501

Tribute Wall

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“ *A yellow candle for a yellow rose of Texas.
Loving condolences to Tracy and John from
Sally the Beth* ❤️ 🌹



Sally Beth Fellers - March 12, 2024 at 05:14 PM