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## SALUTE TO SERVICE: STATE REP. ROBERT HARGRAVES

# Rep. Hargraves had dedicated partner in wife, Ellen

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Correspondent

GROTON — Ellen Hargraves first met her husband Robert while visiting at the home of a college sorority sister. The first question he asked Ellen was "Who did you vote for in the 1960 election?" she said.

Apparently, her answer clicked. Certainly, they did. "We moved on from there," she says now, laughing. "If I said I voted for Kennedy, who knows what would have happened?"

The Hargraves have been married for 48 years. For most of them, they have lived in the cozy colonial on a quiet street in Groton where they brought up three children. Ellen — a retired teacher — graciously agreed to be interviewed there this week.

On a recent afternoon, she welcomed guests in her sunny country kitchen. Her cross-country skis stood outside the door, ready for jaunts on a nearby bicycle trail. She offered fresh coffee and ginger cookies before sitting down to chat in the living room.

It's a long, light-filled room with a fireplace, antique rocking chairs and a comfy red sofa. Family photos adorn the top of a baby grand piano. Ellen gives lessons to her grandkids, she said. One granddaughter likes to sew and she's working on a project with her now.

One of the photos shows the family on vacation at Mount Washington four years ago: Ellen, Bob, their three grown children and nine grandchildren. More pictures and mementoes are tucked away on bookshelves.

On a table by a window, formal wedding photos of their children, Carolyn, Patricia and Robert, form an eye-catching triptych.

Asked about the layout of the house, Ellen gave a nutshell version of a past renovation that modernized the kitchen and turned a porch into a spacious family room that doubles as Bob's workspace. She also noted other changes. An attached garage was once a barn that housed several generations of sheep. Next to it, a converted child's playhouse (moved from a neighboring property) became a nursery for the lambs, she said.

The sheep saga started when daughter Patti was in middle school: A 4-H project. After graduating from high school, Patti suggested selling the sheep, but her mom continued to raise them for 14 years, shuttling the sheep to Topsfield and other county fairs. She also taught school during that time, she said, recalling how some bottle-fed lambs — the stronger ones — became quasi-class projects. Her students loved feeding them, she said.

The sheep-raising project is one illustration of an independent philosophy that helped Ellen achieve a natural household balance with her active, strong-willed husband, especially after he started his career in politics. "I've always had my own interests," she said.

A native of Rochester, New York, Ellen went to college in Ohio and moved to Cambridge after graduating to launch a teaching career. Accustomed to city life, she would not have dreamed then that she'd settle down in a small town like Groton, she said.

But she came to love it. "Groton is a beautiful town, a great place to raise a family!" she said. Listing activities she's been involved in over the years, it's clear she's become part of its fabric. She served for several years on the Groton School Committee and later on the Nashoba Tech School Committee; sang in the church choir, still does. She recently becoming a member of the bell choir and performed in the town Christmas celebration.

Bob Hargraves, who recently retired from a long and successful second career as a Massachusetts State Representative, was a teacher at the Prescott School in Groton when he and Ellen met in 1960. He told her about an opening for a sixth grade social studies and reading teacher, she said. She landed the job.

"My first principal was Florence Roche," she said. "She was so supportive." She got to know the now-iconic principal that first year. "I used to get to school early," she said. "She would be having coffee with Peg Moody." Ellen commuted to her new job, driving her "little Renault" from Cambridge.

Then she and Bob got married. Their first home was an apartment in a big white colonial across from the Baptist church on Main Street.

After a couple of years, Ellen took time off from teaching to raise her children, she said. She would later teach in Ayer for 15 years before returning to Groton, where she taught until she retired.

She shared a story about the birth of their third child. Bob was Town Moderator then. He was on the phone, preparing for a meeting.

Things started to happen fast. They headed for the hospital, but didn't make it. The baby was born in the front seat of the car.

Bob had been a moderator for several years before he ran for selectman, Ellen said. At the same time, his teaching career was moving forward. He became principal of North Middlesex Regional High School.

Asked how she felt when he decided to run for state representative, Ellen said they talked about it, but no, he didn't ask. And she wouldn't have balked if he had. "He's pretty assertive," she said. "We both have our own as well as shared interests." Politics was one of his — a big one.

"He first ran on stickers," Ellen recalled, because it was too late to get on the ballot. Sketching that first campaign, she said State Representative Augusta "Gusty" Hornblower was very ill but had not withdrawn yet. An opponent surfaced in the Republican primary. There was some controversy. Ten days before her death, "Gusty bowed out and endorsed Bob." Ellen was teaching full time in the regional school district and had to "walk a line" so she didn't actively campaign, she said. "I stuffed envelopes."

Asked about the worst and the best of being a representative's wife for 16 years, she said the best part was it was so good for her husband. "He loved it so much!" she said, helping people, state house camaraderie. "When your spouse is really happy," it strengthens the relation-

ship. No argument there. And there were perks for her, too, such as attending two presidential inaugurals and the glittering inaugural balls!

But there was one campaign that turned nasty.

In 2000, a charismatic young Democrat named Joe McManus challenged Bob Hargraves for his seat. His bid ultimately failed after skeletons tumbled out of his closet - fake teaching credentials, among others — but he was an aggressive opponent. He trotted out Ted Kennedy and John Kerry, Ellen said. But the moment she will always remember as the worst was when McManus held a "rally" on the town hall steps and "said things about Bob's voting record" that were not true. Aiming to discredit his opponent, his hateful words also hurt her. The Republican caucus had voted to reduce the state budget by a small percentage.

Pinpointing one line item in that budget, McManus said Hargraves "voted against breast cancer research." The memory brings tears, even now. "My mother died of breast cancer," Ellen said.

A group of "young Republicans" backed Hargraves, writing letters to local papers that set the record straight, she said. Then, the other candidate crashed and burned on his own.

She admits now wanting her husband to retire then, mentioning it at supper, when they'd meet, talk, then go off to pursue their separate obligations and interests. "It was always one more election," though.

Ellen retired from teaching in 2001 and has served on the State Teachers' Retirement Board since that time. "It has been a most interesting experience and has taken considerable time in preparation for the monthly meetings," she said.

She joined the Groton Woman's Club, continued to sing in the church choir, became a member of the new hand bell choir, which she enjoys immensely. We are called "The Faith Ringers," which her husband jokingly calls "the dingalings." She takes his teasing with good humor.

Ellen also works at the Nashoba Valley Medical Center Gift Shop as a volunteer. Once a week, she reads to residents at Seven Hills in Groton. Recently, she was appointed to the Prescott School Reuse Committee and became involved in long-range planning at the Groton Historical Society.

She especially loves spending time with her grandchildren. Now, her husband will have more family time, too. That is, if the sign out front doesn't generate too much business. "Justice of the Peace," it reads.



NASHOBA PUBLISHING/JOHN LOVE

Ellen Hargraves talks about being the wife of a legislator, a role she played for 16 years.



COURTESY PHOTO

State Rep. Robert Hargraves and his wife, Ellen, at the Texas/Wyoming Inaugural ball for President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.



State Rep. Robert Hargraves and his wife, Ellen, visit with residents at an open house for the Public Safety Building in Groton.