



Florence Shapiro

PLANO'S FIRST FEMALE MAYOR

BY BRIT MOTT

► *Join us as we salute some of Plano's finest leading ladies.*

With a career in politics that spans more than three decades, Florence Shapiro has witnessed firsthand the progression of women in public office. She joined the Plano City Council in 1979, when the only woman on council at that time was retiring,

Louise Sherrill, who owned the *Plano Star Courier*. “Several people called and said, ‘You need to run for City Council. You can run for the woman’s seat.’ I look back on that now and it’s not quite so clever. There isn’t and never should be a ‘woman’s seat,’” she said.

“At one Town Hall meeting, a man stood up and said, ‘I understand you have three small children. Don’t you think you ought to be staying at home taking care of your children?’”

Those were the ’70s and despite gender discrimination, Florence served six terms on Plano City Council and was the only woman for many years until Ann Jones was elected in 1990.

During this time, she was also the first female president of the North Texas Council of Governments, and she served as president of the Texas Municipal League.

Fortunately, the late ’80s and ’90s brought change, as more women entered public office. “I remember very vividly in the late ’80s, there were many female mayors. In fact, there was a bumper sticker that read, ‘Texas. Where men are men and women are mayors.’ It was in vogue. Out of nine or 10 major cities, six, I think, were female mayors. It was not an oddity.”

Florence served as Plano’s first female mayor from 1990–1992. “By then, my gender never seemed to be a deterrent nor was it of great value,” she said.

Florence was elected to the Texas Senate in 1992. In 2005, she was elected President pro tempore, becoming second in the gubernatorial line of succession behind the Lieutenant Governor. She was the first senator from Collin County to serve in that position in more than 40 years. On April 9, 2005, when both Governor Rick Perry and Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst were out of the state on official business, Florence Shapiro served as Governor for a day, the sixth woman in Texas history to do so.

The daughter of two Holocaust survivors, Florence was born in New York City and moved to Dallas as a young child. She graduated from Hillcrest High School and was the first in her family to attend college. She graduated from The University of Texas at Austin in 1970 with a B.S. in secondary education and taught English and speech at Richardson High School for two years. She still has relationships with some of her students today.

Florence also founded an advertising, public relations and special events agency called Shapiro & Company, but after 10 years, she closed it down due to her demanding schedule in the Texas Senate.

For Florence, politics was never a dream to be passionately pursued, rather an “extension of volunteerism.” Three years prior to her foray into public office, she founded the Plano Service League, today known as the Junior League of Collin County. It began with 13 women and has grown into a league of 900-plus, serving the community in a variety of capacities.

Florence put it simply: “The inspiration for it was volunteerism. Plano was a very small community at the time, about 35,000–40,000 people, and yet, there was so much that needed to be done.”

Under Florence’s leadership and with the help of many women in the Plano Service League, she founded the Information and Referral Center, which grew to become the Assistant League of



Collin County, in addition to the Volunteer Center of Plano. “Those really were the impetus for growing the organic organization of the Service League,” said Florence. “We did it because we saw the need and we said, ‘All hands on deck.’”

The league stayed busy and grew fast. Some of the projects included performing puppet shows to teach low socioeconomic kids the importance of dental hygiene and visiting Heritage Senior Living to care for the elderly. Their first fundraiser was at the Heritage Farmstead Museum, where they often cooked meals and volunteered as docents. They also held a fundraiser called A Touch of Country when Willow Bend was a hunt and polo club. “We brought the Dallas Symphony Orchestra out and held an event under the stars. Those were our original fundraisers to give money back into the community where it was needed.”

The original 13 volunteers were all moms, but Florence stressed that it wasn’t a mom’s group, rather they focused strictly on volunteering. “It was not a social club; it was really a volunteer organization, and I laugh about it today because our motto was, ‘No Service League after 5 o’clock.’ Kids were home from school and husbands came home from work, so we were very respectful of each other’s time.”

Florence and her husband of 47 years, Howard, came to Plano in 1972. He was in law school at SMU and was raised in a small town in Central Texas. Florence wanted to stay in Dallas so, “Plano became the perfect spot for us because it was a small town, but we still had Dallas ties.”

Howard still practices law in Plano with their son, Todd. Their oldest daughter, Lisa Strauss, practices law in Houston, and their youngest daughter, Staci Rubin, is a stay-at-home mom of five in Plano.

There’s nothing that lights up Florence Shapiro’s face more than her role as Mimi to 12 grandchildren: Joshua, Noa, Ari, Ella, Sam, Zach, Natalie, Sophie, Olivia, Harper, Eli and Brody.

Nine of the 12 live within a mile of her Willow Bend home and the three oldest are in Houston. They range in age from 15 (the oldest) to twins (who are almost 3). “I spend as much time as I can with them. My greatest joy is being with them and being part of their lives.”

Florence is still very active in the community. She serves on several state educational-driven boards as well as the Communities Foundation of Texas. Come January, she’ll chair the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum. She’s also a board member of the AT&T Performing Arts Center, Children’s Medical Center and UT Southwestern Medical Center.

About two years ago, she reunited with the Junior League of Collin County. “I had received this amazing national leadership award called the Mary Harriman Award, and at the conference in Washington, D.C., many of the Collin County league members expressed interest in running for public office or volunteering for boards and commissions. So, with a very strong committee of like-minded women, we ventured out to start a program called Go Govern.”

She added, “I’m very proud of the Junior League. They do some amazing work. It’s like my 40 years have come right back to full circle.”

On a final note, when we asked Florence, as a working woman or a woman in public office, how important is it to invest in yourself, she answered, “I fully believe that you have to have a good self-esteem to be in public office as well as in the work force. You’re being pulled in so many different directions with so many different attitudes about your job thrust upon you by others that you have to have self-respect, a strong belief in yourself,” she pauses, “and that translates into investing in yourself.”