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## Women's stories translate to a good read

Telegraph, The (Nashua, NH) - Sunday, March 22, 2009

"Women at the Table: 40 Intimate Profiles of Political Women of the Northeast" by Michaeline Della Fera; L&L Dreamspell; paper; 420 pages; \$21.95.

When it comes to politics, change is a certainty.

For those who write books about politics, some facts are bound to be outdated as soon as the book hits the bookstores.

When Michaeline Della Fera, of Hollis, took on the daunting task of writing about some of the most powerful politicians in New England, she was up against time and change.

When I sat down with "Women at the Table: 40 Intimate Profiles of Political Women of the Northeast," I flipped immediately to the New Hampshire section, more than 100 pages on 12 of our own. Right away, I began the update:

"Of the current twenty-four Senate members, fourteen are Democrats and ten are Republicans, ten, or 41.6% are women." (Kind of funny, the visual of 41.6 percent senators.)

In the last election, which took place after the book went to print, that percentage shifted in a dramatic way. We now have a female majority in our Senate - the first, I believe, in U.S. history. (Della Fera's next book will be "Thirteen Women: A Look at the New Hampshire Majority Female Senate." So, she's on top of that situation.)

Despite the mental adjustments, accounting for changes in the fast-moving world of politics, "Women at the Table" fills in a lot of blanks in a satisfying way.

Kelly Ayotte, our newly reappointed attorney general, for example, is in the news constantly. Her face is instantly recognizable, but what's her background? What does she think about her job, the relationship between her office and the governor's office? What are some of her personal values and goals?

Della Fera lets us know. Ayotte not only is our first woman AG, she's also the youngest ever appointed.

She knows in her heart she is a powerful woman but outside of the office she is just "Kelly."


"I change diapers, read bedtime stories to my daughter, make dinner and do the dishes," she says. "Neither my husband nor my daughter care that during the day I'm the Attorney General."

Appointed by both a Republican governor, Craig Benson, and a Democrat, John Lynch, Ayotte explains that while it's important to understand the politics of an office operating within state government, "Politics can never drive any of my decisions."

The name **Betty Hall**, of Brookline, may be less familiar, except to voters in her district who elected her to the N.H. House of Representatives 14 times.

At eighty-six, **Betty Hall** hasn't thought of slowing down. In 1940, she ran for Supervisor of the Checklist and since then has served on school boards, finance committees, and numerous local boards. Elected to the House in 1970, she has worked tirelessly for the people of New Hampshire sixty plus years.

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One of the things we learn about **Hall** : She has a bone to pick about partisan politics. In the old days, she says, working in committees was completely nonpartisan.

We completely forgot who was a Republican and who was a Democrat. Everyone was absorbed in the issues before them. And every vote was a nonpartisan vote on the issue. Today there's a real effort on the part of the leadership of both parties to ask you to vote their way. That was never done in the sixties and seventies.

Which is why, in part, at age 87, she became an Independent.

Other New Hampshire women profiled include Sylvia Larson, Margaret Hassan, Terie Norelli and Donnalee Lozeau. No Jeanne Shaheen, though. That's strange; maybe Della Fera couldn't snag an interview.

I also wondered about Donna Sytek and Arnie Arnesen. They weren't in the section on New Hampshire, but sure enough, appear prominently in the chapter called "Barrier Breakers," dedicated to "all the women politicians who ran for elected office before it was the 'in thing.' " Women who "paved the way" to those "now serving and those who, in the future, will dedicate their lives to public service."

We all know Donna Sytek as the former Speaker of the House, a powerful Republican leader. She broke a barrier by becoming the first female Speaker.

Men and women alike told me they couldn't vote for a woman Speaker. Men didn't surprise me but women surprised me when they said they just couldn't envision a woman Speaker.

She lost on her first run, but won on the second. And that, she says, was "when the fun began. Friends come and go. Enemies accumulate."

Thick skin, determination, high energy and extraordinary commitment needed - that's the message I take away from these stories of successful, and fascinating, women.

Arnesen embodies all of those qualities. If you live in New Hampshire, you know the name from television, radio, her days in the N.H. House and her dramatic runs for governor and congress. Her story alone is worth the price of this book.

Whether or not you agree with Arnesen's politics (she, gasp, refused to take the tax pledge!), you may very well be interested in how she became such an articulate maverick, a nationally recognized commentator and, as she says, "probably the best-known poor person in New Hampshire."

Della Fera is out and about promoting her book, often appearing with one or more of the women profiled. For her complete list of events, check her Web site at [mdellafera.com](http://mdellafera.com).

**Memo:** Rebecca Rule, a writer who lives in Northwood, writes this column weekly except the last Sunday of the month. Her e-mail address is [rebeccarule@metrocast.net](mailto:rebeccarule@metrocast.net).

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