

## Chapter Seventeen

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# Politics is Good Business

*“I’m a fiscal conservative but social liberal.  
Boy, I believe in everything. Pro-choice, pro-everything.  
I’m not a Republican or a Democrat.”*



TRAVEL IS A GREAT WAY of finding out what’s going on in the world. Politics is a great way of finding out what’s going on at home. And El Paso, Texas has some of the most interesting politics in the world and has had for some time. Back in the 1880s, Wyatt Earp visited El Paso, spent one night and left the next day for Tombstone, Arizona. He thought El Paso was too dangerous.

Politics anywhere is more than a hobby. It’s good business. Being active in politics helps us stay in touch with the decision makers in our community. It helps our business maintain a high profile, and it gives us the financial contacts that we need as our business grows and expands.

I wasn’t always interested in politics. I’ve never been one to get involved with groups, organizations or causes. In my mind I was a self-proclaimed citizen of the world who took the global view. To me, it always seemed more important whether Pakistan nuked India, or if the exchange rate of

the Brazilian *cruzeiro* dropped against the U.S. dollar than who won the city council seat in my district.

Over the years there have been a few candidates who came by our showroom soliciting campaign donations, but that was pretty much the extent of our involvement. I'd cough up a fifty-dollar bill or something, the money and the candidate would disappear about as fast as a piece of fried chicken around our German shepherds, and that would be that.

We remained indifferent to politics until 1989 when Bonnie and I met Peggy Rosson at a friend's Christmas party. She was running for the Texas Senate at the time. Our involvement in her campaign and the friendship that we developed changed my life and views forever.

THE MOST IMPORTANT RULE I've learned in politics is this: don't make enemies, make friends. Of course, politics is a tough business and sometimes it's hard to keep smiling. But I always try. I honestly do.

The other rule in politics is that if you zing somebody, they're going to zing you back. In other words, if someone does you a favor or gives you money, you will eventually have to do a favor for them. There's a balance sheet in politics just like there is in business. And in both business and politics, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

But just because lunch ain't free don't mean it ain't fun! The great thing about living, working and being involved in El Paso politics is the chance I've had to meet so many great local people over the years.

Take, for instance, Mr. Jonathan Rogers. He was probably the most influential man in El Paso and did as much or more than any other person to help El Paso grow and prosper. He was one of a kind. He usually preferred to stay behind the scenes, but when he decided he'd had enough of something, he was not shy about stepping up and fixing it. In one such example, in the early 1980s he jumped into politics and ended up serving four terms as our mayor. He died in 2007 after a brief illness.

In the late 1980s, when the banking crisis hit and banks were being sold and merged almost every week, Rogers watched as a number of national chain banks came into El Paso and took more and more of El Paso's

capital out of the community. He didn't like what he saw, so he fixed it. He, John MacGuire, and several others decided to form a local bank dedicated to serving El Pasoans and keeping their money in El Paso.

In 1990, I was honored when Mr. Rogers offered me the opportunity to be one of the original investors in Bank of the West. I don't look like a banker, but Mr. Rogers knew me and knew my business. That's one of the great things about El Paso. People here on the border don't care about history or lineage. They are very accepting and take you for what you are. And with Bonnie and me, what you see is what you get. Now the original bank in downtown has grown into five banks across the city and the stock has skyrocketed.

Another great El Pasoan that I've gotten to know through politics is Mike Dipp. Mike's family migrated from Lebanon to Guadalajara, Mexico, then his father settled in El Paso. Mike is in the wholesale grocery business, among other things. He is one of the most generous and civic-minded individuals I have ever met. Mike has helped hundreds of people in hundreds of ways and is involved in almost every political race in town. I always like to hear Mike quote car-maker Henry Ford, "Never complain, never explain."

Mike once paid me a great compliment. "Dusty," he said, "your house is the Switzerland of El Paso. Everyone from all parts of town can get together at your house, relax, talk and start to work things out."

I'VE OPENED UP MY HOUSE to politicians of all kinds. I enjoy knowing and working with people who have different political views. Democrats, Republicans, it really doesn't matter to me, as long as I think the person is honest and will work for the good of El Paso.

I've thrown parties for candidates from constable to senator. One of the biggest parties I ever threw was for our old friend, Alicia Chacon. I set up a mariachi band on the roof of our pool house, a rock band on the balcony of the house, a piano player in the living room and had dancers from Juárez performing on the patio. We filled the fountain with 1,500 pounds of ice and beer and had waiters and bartenders circulating all

through the house. The place was packed with about six hundred people. It wasn't cheap and afterwards the whole neighborhood was littered with our red plastic cups. But it was a helluva party, and Alicia won the election!

AS I MENTIONED, it was Peggy Rosson's campaign for State Senator that really began our involvement in politics. When we met, we immediately liked her. After we talked for a while, it was pretty clear that she was smart, open and direct, but at the same time she was so soft-spoken and seemed so shy that she was about the unlikeliest candidate we'd ever run across.

She wasn't new to politics. In fact she had a pretty interesting background, but this was her first run for office. She had worked as a paralegal for years, retired to become a full-time wife, later offered to do volunteer work for the city and was appointed to the El Paso Utility Regulatory Board. She became a respected authority on utility regulation and chaired the Board from 1978 to 1983. She was also active in the Democratic Party, serving as precinct chair and volunteering on numerous campaigns, including Mark White's bid for governor. Utility rates and nuke plant cost overruns were big issues in White's campaign. When his opponent, Governor William Clements, was asked during an interview whether he would appoint a consumer to the Public Utility Commission of Texas, he responded that there were no "housewives" in Texas qualified to serve on the PUC! White quickly responded that there were and that if elected, he would appoint one. Mark White won and kept his promise by appointing Peggy as the first woman to serve on and chair the Commission.

A LOT OF THINGS WERE CHANGING in El Paso in 1990 and many people felt that one thing that needed changing was our senator. He had served in the Senate for eighteen years and in the House for a long time before that. An incumbent with that many years in office is hard to beat and nobody had been willing to challenge him for years. Besides his incumbency, there were a few other things that Peggy would have to overcome: in a community that was seventy-two percent Hispanic, he

spoke Spanish and she didn't. He was charming. She was sincere. He was funny. She was as "serious as a heart attack." He was warm and quick with a hug. She was shy and came across as cool and aloof. It was going to be a tough, uphill battle.

What a challenge! We decided we would do everything we could to get her elected!

SENATOR ROSSON has agreed to tell you a little about the campaign from her perspective:

*"As I'm sure you've noticed, when Dusty and Bonnie decide to do something, they don't hold back. Meeting them was undoubtedly one of the best things that's ever happened to me, period. But meeting them when I did and having them with me during my campaign was nothing short of a miracle!*

*"As Dusty has mentioned, we met at a party and clicked. Maybe it was because Bonnie and I had the same midwestern roots and common sense way of looking at things, or because my politics meshed with theirs. Or maybe my campaign situation reminded them of the kinds of challenges they had to overcome when they first started out in their pick-up truck.*

*"I had a really great, if tiny, team of talented, dedicated people working on my campaign. I had a lot of quiet, underground help from people who couldn't afford to offend the incumbent and up-front help from the El Paso New Car Dealers Association, who called a press conference, said it was time for a change and that they were behind me. (This despite the anguished screams of their state association and lobbyist who knew how much punishment it could cost them if I lost!)*

*"I had a great logo and incredible name recognition. What I didn't have was the ability to easily walk into a room full of strangers, stick out my hand and ask for their vote! One of the first things Dusty did was give me a book called How To Work A Room. I read it, but it didn't take. I went to candidate school. No help. I went to a communications expert. No help. I was never going to pass 'Chit-chat 101.' I was never going to master the art of being asked one question but answering a different one of my choosing, and I was never going to master the so-called Pat, Shake & Go: smile, say howdy-do, pat the back, pump the hand and move on to the next person, all in fifteen seconds. I'd smile, a person would ask me*

*a question or want to voice a gripe and I'd spend the next fifteen minutes with them! You don't meet many people that way. Time was getting short! It was January and the Democratic primary was set for early March.*

*"On top of all my personal shortcomings, the press had characterized my supporters as a ragtag band of volunteers out scrounging for \$100 donations, while thousands upon thousands of lobby dollars poured in for my opponent. Dusty to the rescue! My campaign colors were red, black and white. Out of nowhere black T-shirts materialized with 'ROSSON'S RAGTAGS' emblazoned on them. A real morale buster had been turned into a badge of honor!*

*"The next thing I knew, Dusty's in-store weaver had made a big rug with my name on it, the rug was draped across the back of Bonnie's vintage Ford convertible, and Dusty had somehow persuaded his good friend, actor Richard Farnsworth, that the fun way to spend a cold and windy El Paso afternoon would be to ride with us in the Rodeo Parade!*

*"After that the marketing wizard really shifted into high gear. One day Dusty called and asked us to come down to the store. My husband Joe and I pulled into the Saddleblanket parking lot and damn near fell out of the car. There sat one of Dusty's Cadillacs, a beautiful, black 1957 Coupe de Ville, with PEGGY ROSSON FOR STATE SENATOR very professionally painted on the sides. I was stunned!"*

I DROVE PEGGY in that Cadillac all over El Paso. Even when we weren't driving it, it was working for us. Bonnie and I parked it all over town where it was sure to be noticed. One time I parked it by mistake in a lot that was owned by folks who were opposed to Peggy. Sure enough, they had it towed.

But that didn't stop us. Peggy might have been shy, but I sure wasn't. I started taking her to every event I could think of, leading the charge through the crowd. It didn't matter to me if she was tired or had a toothache or anything else. I made sure that Peggy shook hands with as many voters as possible, sometimes twice!

We even used some hook items from El Paso Saddleblanket in the campaign. One of the most popular was worry dolls from Guatemala.

The legend was that if you told your worries to the dolls and stuck them under your pillow, they would worry for you and you could get a good night's sleep. Peggy would tell people that she would worry about their problems for them when she was elected but, until then, they could use the dolls. The older women loved the dolls and word spread through the senior citizens' centers. One day I got a frantic call from Peggy. She had gone to a center to speak, but didn't have any dolls with her. The ladies were furious! We got a box of dolls over to her pronto, she handed them out and the ladies then sat down and listened to her.

The incumbent outspent us five to one. A few days before the election one of the newspapers reported that their polling showed him winning by eight to one. They were wrong! Peggy won with sixty-seven percent of the vote!

EL PASO HAD ALWAYS BEEN such a Democratic stronghold that if you won the primary, people took it for granted that you were the next officeholder. We had one small problem with that. Peggy had a Republican opponent! Now in politics there's two ways to run: scared or unopposed. So we kept working all through the summer and fall to keep up interest in her campaign. We had hundreds of T-shirts and baseball caps printed and got them out to supporters and kept the "Peggy car" visible all over town.

*"Dusty's Cadillac turned out to be my best ambassador. I'd be out on the campaign trail and as soon as I introduced myself, the person would say 'Oh, the lady with the car!' and smile.*

*"Dusty and Bonnie continued to set up events and help me in every way they could. I had gotten a little more relaxed about campaigning after the primary, but there were still times when Dusty could tell I needed a good shove to get me moving and he wasn't shy about delivering it!"*

Election day finally rolled around. Peggy won by more than two to one. It was one of my proudest moments. We drove the Cadillac down to the election party at Democratic Headquarters. I immediately took out a can of black spray paint and painted out the word "for" so that the logo read "PEGGY ROSSON STATE SENATOR."

Bonnie and I went down to Austin for Peggy's swearing in and stayed in close touch during the legislative session. I became her eyes and ears in El Paso and somehow ended up being her unofficial go-to-guy. A lot of people aren't comfortable contacting an officeholder directly and so they "go-to" one of their friends instead.

Shortly after Peggy took office I sent her a big velvet Elvis painting to hang in her office in the capitol. It started out as sort of a joke. Here were the other senators with big expensive paintings and artwork in their offices, some on loan from galleries, some that they owned. And there was Peggy with a velvet Elvis from Juárez! But Elvis turned out to be a real ice breaker for her and her staff.

*"At first, my receptionist would see the door open a crack and then hear a whispered 'See, I told you so.' Then one-by-one staff members from other senate offices started coming by and asking if I could possibly get an Elvis for them. Pretty soon we were getting regular deliveries from Dusty and giving them away as fast as we could get them. What was commonplace in El Paso turned out to be a real hot item in Austin. At Christmas I was asked if I could get a really big Elvis for the main door prize at the Senate Staff Party. As always, Dusty delivered."*

NOT ALL OF THE PARTIES we threw for politicians went smoothly. The year Peggy took office, the Lieutenant Governor formed the International Relations Trade and Technology Committee to address issues relating to the Border. Senator Carlos Truan was named Chair. Since she represented a border district, Peggy was appointed to the committee. During the interims between legislative sessions, Senator Truan held hearings all along the border on various issues, including how Texas was going to be affected by NAFTA and what Texas needed to be doing to insure that it worked to our advantage.

One of the hearings was to be held in El Paso and Bonnie and I decided to host a reception for the visiting senators. We invited all the big players to come, got to know the committee members and talk to them about their concerns. We had a really good turnout. It wasn't the usual



huge, noisy crowd, but there were groups scattered all over the house, talking and getting acquainted.

Bonnie is a great piano player and there were a bunch of people in the living room listening to her play our baby grand. I was enjoying the music and the people. Then all of our full grown German shepherds started to get into it: growling, snapping and yipping at each other. Dogs are a lot like kids. They always seem to act their worst when company is around.

I stepped in between the dogs to try to calm them and one of them nipped my finger. It wasn't anything serious, but the blood began to flow from that little cut and my white shirt was soon really spattered with blood. The dogs were barking, the blood was flowing, the guests were wide-eyed with concern for their safety and mine, and Bonnie just kept right on playing the piano. The whole thing looked like a saloon fight in a western movie! Welcome to the wild, wild West, Senators! We must not have scared them too much though. Later, both the Senate and the House of Representatives passed resolutions honoring El Paso Saddleblanket for promoting international trade.

IN TEXAS, the Lieutenant Governor is the most powerful person in state government because he's also the President of the Senate. As such, he controls the fate of every piece of legislation filed. Bob Bullock took office as Lieutenant Governor at the same time Peggy joined the Senate. He was already a legend in Texas politics and probably knew more about Texas than anyone alive. His devotion to Texas was absolute and it was his habit to always close his remarks with "God Bless Texas." While Peggy said it was a very sincere prayer, there were others who quipped that it was more like a direct order. Either way, it was his trademark.

We often made customized saddleblankets for our customers and one Christmas Peggy asked us to make one for Lieutenant Governor Bullock. She wanted us to put "God Bless Texas" and "Bob Bullock" on the wear leathers. No problem! Big problem! For some reason our leather guy couldn't get the right "x"! He finally tracked one down and we got the

blanket to Peggy in time for her to give it to the Lieutenant Governor for Christmas. She said he really liked it. By that time, Bonnie and I were devout fans of Lieutenant Governor Bullock and we decided to make a special limited edition of “Bob Bullock—God Bless Texas” saddleblankets. We sent him a good supply to give to his friends. In return he sent us an engraved gavel which is today on my office desk and is one of our most cherished possessions.

It was a sad day and a big loss for Texas when Bob Bullock passed away. We will never forget him.

WHEN PEGGY TOOK OFFICE in 1990, the census had been completed and it was redistricting time. New legislative districts were drawn and adopted by the legislature. Although the usual senate term is four years, after redistricting every senator had to run for office, then draw lots for two and four year terms. That way only half the Senate would be up for re-election every two years until the next census.

When Peggy got home after her first regular session and a couple of special sessions, she found that she would have two opponents in the Democratic Primary. We were off and running again! It was another hard campaign, but this time we had a little more money in the war chest and Peggy had a good record to run on. She won the primary with fifty-seven percent of the vote and had no Republican opponent. In 1993 she drew a four year term and we all heaved a sigh of relief. Then the courts overturned the redistricting plan and everybody had to run again in 1994. That time she drew no opposition.

Peggy retired from the Senate in 1997. Bonnie and I thought about selling the Cadillac but by then it had been “the Peggy car” for so long that we just gave it to Peggy and Joe as a retirement present.

*“There is no way I’ll ever be able to thank Dusty and Bonnie for everything they did to get me to the Senate and help me stay there. They opened their hearts, their home and their checkbook to me when it really mattered and never asked anything in return. They had skills and contacts I didn’t and used them unsparingly on my behalf. When things got ugly, as they often do in politics, they hung*

*tough and always had my back. They shared their laughter and enthusiasm with me when I needed it the most. They were always there for me and they still are. They are family."*

WORKING ON PEGGY'S CAMPAIGNS taught me a lot about what a circus and sewer politics can be sometimes, but it also taught me that there are some politicians you can trust. We made a lot of new friends, gained recognition for our company and had a lot of fun. But the real satisfaction came from helping to give a good, honest, hardworking person the opportunity to serve the people of El Paso. I'm proud of that and today Peggy Rosson remains one of my most trusted friends.