

ELAINE SCRUGGS

GOVERNMENT / LEGISLATIVE / JUDICIAL



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Over the past decade, the City of Glendale has muscled its way into the national stage, hosting a Super Bowl, the first ever College Football National Championship game and numerous other sports and entertainment showcases that have drawn millions of visitors from all over the world. There are many who can claim credit for the West Valley's transformation from suburb to spotlight. But there is only one person who's known as "the straw that stirs the drink."

That would be Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs.

Scruggs has led the Glendale City Council since 1993, and has quite literally put her city on the map. On the way, her "go big or go home" leadership style has garnered both fans and critics, but nothing has dimmed her zest for leading the West Valley.

"I still have a lot of passion for the job, and for the West Valley coming into its own and getting its fair share," Scruggs said. "I know that I am called the straw that stirs the drink, and I know that some people say that with admiration and some with animosity. I'm aware of it, but they are not going to make me back off."

Scruggs' comfort in the spotlight and fierceness as a leader define her now. But the inexperienced stay-at-home mom who applied for the inaugural Glendale Leadership class of 1982 was a far cry from the fiery Elaine Scruggs of today.

Like many Arizonans, Scruggs is a transplant. As a young married couple, she and her husband Larry moved from her native Pasadena, California, in 1971. Scruggs' parents had relocated to Phoenix, and she decided to follow them so she and Larry could attend college. With Larry's GI Bill, they were able to buy a house in north-central Phoenix for \$250 down. House hopping as real estate values rose, the couple eventually settled in north Glendale.

Scruggs' was on a career track with Mountain Bell as a manager, but stepped away in 1979 shortly after she and Larry adopted their infant daughter, Jennifer.

"I had always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom," Scruggs said.

When Jennifer was a few years older and attending preschool, Scruggs began again to look for something she could do for her community. That's when she read about Glendale Leadership, a program designed to mold leaders by immersing them in civic functions and education. Scruggs later learned she was a surprise – out of left field – pick for the Glendale Chamber of Commerce's inaugural leadership class.

"They told me afterwards when they were reading my application. I said I was retired and my age didn't really fit, and when they asked if I was registered to vote I said no," Scruggs said. "Apparently nobody really admits something like that. My answers to their questions were so unusual they thought, 'I've got to meet this person.'"

If Scruggs was a seemingly unusual pick for leadership grooming, the skills and desire to serve the public that would define her political career became apparent very quickly. Organized, motivated and possessing plenty of spare time, Scruggs was quickly tapped by the Chamber to manage the leadership program just a year after she graduated.

"I believe in civic engagement," Scruggs said. "It's a way to build a strong community and to build your future leaders. Civic engagement is just a noble way to spend your life. It's fun and it produces better leaders, not people who enter the fray

just because they are angry and want to change something."

That belief in civic engagement – and strong encouragement from her husband -- ultimately led Scruggs to run for the City Council in 1990. It was Glendale's first election since going to a district system, and her residence in the north end of the city wouldn't be such a liability. Scruggs had two opponents, but she was a surprise winner. Her honeymoon would be short.

"The morning after the election, at 6:30 in the morning, somebody found our home phone number," Scruggs said. "I wasn't even seated yet, but the guy called to talk to me about a Little League baseball field that needed attention."

In 1993 Glendale's mayor resigned to become a Justice of the Peace. It was up to the remaining six council members to appoint a successor. However, three of those council members, including Scruggs, were interested in the job. Touting her business and community experience, Scruggs pulled in three votes and became Mayor of Glendale.

She hasn't slowed down since. Not even a battle with breast cancer in 2009 has dimmed her passion and persistence for the job.

For Scruggs and Glendale, the transformation to the main stage began with the extension of the Loop 101 Freeway during the 1990s, which brought access to transportation and opportunity to the West Valley. Malls like Arrowhead Towne Center and the Midwestern University medical school soon located in Glendale. And then the city, under Scruggs' forceful leadership, entered into an agreement to build Westgate and Jobing.com arena, the new home for the National Hockey League's Phoenix Coyotes.

Fast forward to 2006 when Glendale opened the new University of Phoenix Stadium for the Arizona Cardinals, which hosted the city's first NFL game, a Fiesta Bowl, the nation's first BCS college football championship game, another Fiesta Bowl and a Super Bowl in 18 months.

Scruggs is proud that the events went flawlessly, but said that was the result of tremendous focus and preparations by city staff and police. It was a chance to introduce her adopted city to the world. And now, Scruggs is squarely focused on the future.

"I really feel I'm doing what I was meant to do," Scruggs said. "I don't think many people get a chance to say that. I really enjoy the process of creating public policy, listening to input. The interaction with the public has always been the most rewarding aspect of the job."