

## Olene S. Walker Time Line

**1930** » Born in Ogden

**1953** » Graduated from Brigham Young University with a bachelor's degree in political science



**1954** » Graduated from Stanford University with a master's degree in political science

**1954** » Married Myron Walker

**1963** » Settled with her family in Salt Lake City

**1970-1973** » Education consultant for the U.S. Department of Education

**1974-1979** » Salt Lake City School District Volunteer Program director

**1980-1989** » Founder and director of the Salt Lake Education Foundation

**1981** » Graduated from the University of Utah with a doctoral degree in education administration

**1981-1989** » Utah state representative

**1989-1992** » Community development director for the state of Utah

**1993-2003** » Utah lieutenant governor

**2003-2005** » Utah governor

## Governor Walker

### Olene S. Walker

*"I've always thought leadership was the ability to get things done. I look and say, 'These are the things we need to do. Let's get them done.' I've always had a hectic schedule, so I didn't have a lot of time to ponder."<sup>1</sup>*

Olene S. Walker's straightforward definition of leadership speaks volumes about the remarkable woman whose steady path to power led her at age 72 to serve as Utah's first woman governor, from November 5, 2003, to January 3, 2005.

Never in 25 years of public service did the namesake of the Weber State University (WSU) Olene S. Walker Institute of Politics & Public Service make excuses or balk at obstacles. Walker set an ambitious agenda for her term as governor, and in just 14 months accomplished many of the goals she had set

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<sup>1</sup> Madsen, "Developing Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Governors," University Press of America (2009): 235

forth in 14 far-reaching initiatives. Walker established statewide programs to encourage early literacy skills and help children in foster care transition to adulthood. She acted to protect watershed areas in all Utah counties, and made progress toward reforming Utah's tax code, among other accomplishments.

Walker "is a shrewd politician, a woman determined to make a difference with the power she has earned," *The Salt Lake Tribune* wrote in naming Walker its 2003 Utahn of the Year. "She is a mother, grandmother, an educator, and a businesswoman as well, with a palpable feel for the people who live here and for their needs and aspirations. She seems the kind of person our forefathers had in mind when they aspired to create a government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people.'"<sup>2</sup>

Walker's legacy, earned not just through her history-making term as Utah's 15<sup>th</sup> governor, but through decades of leadership and public service, is preserved in the Walker Institute as it works to foster political engagement and public service. The Institute's goal is to put and keep young people on the path Walker chose as a young girl growing up on a dairy and cattle farm west of Ogden in what is now West Haven.

Walker was born on November 15, 1930, the second of five children of Thomas O. Smith and Nina Hadley Smith. Both parents were educators in addition to operating a 100-acre farm. Her father was Ogden School District superintendent for 25 years until his retirement.

The future governor's interest in leadership surfaced early. In an interview, Walker recalled lying on the grass and gazing at the stars one summer night surrounded by friends who were talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. While the other girls spoke of being wives and mothers, Walker told them matter-of-factly: "I want to be president."

Walker remembers being an outgoing youth whom adults regarded as influential to her peers. She earned her first elected office in junior high school and went on to hold numerous leadership positions as a teenager in school clubs and her church. She loved sports and played them informally throughout her youth. She also participated in both debate and extemporaneous speaking.

Those latter pursuits earned Walker a debate scholarship to Weber College, now WSU. After her first year, she transferred to Brigham Young University, where she actively participated in student government while majoring in political science and earning a certificate to teach high school.

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<sup>2</sup> "Utahn of the Year: 2003: Olene Walker, Utah Governor," *The Salt Lake Tribune* (December 29, 2006):1

Walker's academic achievements had just begun. After graduating from BYU in 1953, she earned a scholarship to study political science at Stanford University, where she received her master's degree in 1954. She considered accepting a two-year Rotary fellowship to Italy but decided instead to marry Myron Walker that same year, and the couple moved to Boston so he could pursue a master's of business administration degree at Harvard University.

While in Boston, Walker worked in new accounts at Polaroid Corporation, but she credits the launch of her career to the countless school, community, and church leadership roles she embraced while raising her seven children. Walker, whose family moved 10 times in 13 years before settling in Salt Lake City in 1963, served as PTA president of every school her children attended.

"I absolutely benefitted from my K-12 volunteer work," Walker is quoted as saying in the book "Developing Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Governors," by Susan R. Madsen. "When I look back on my experiences, I believe that I had many opportunities to write, speak, and expand and strengthen many skills important for leadership."<sup>3</sup>

Walker's volunteer work led to part-time paid work as an education consultant working in curriculum development and, later, evaluating federal Title III literacy and language acquisition programs. She ended up running a federal program for the Salt Lake City School District and later founded and operated the Salt Lake Education Foundation.

In 1976, after all her children were in school, Walker began pursuing a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Utah, a feat she accomplished while continuing to work in education and caring for her family by setting aside time from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. each day to study and research and write her dissertation. The accomplishment is even more remarkable considering that Walker first was elected to the Utah Legislature while finishing her doctoral degree.

Co-workers, neighbors, and friends urged Walker to seek a seat in the Utah House of Representatives, even though she was a Republican living in one of Salt Lake City's most Democratic districts. Her children helped her campaign. "I would go door to door, and neighborhood children would answer and tell their parents, 'It's Mylene's mom,' or 'It's Tom's mom,'" Walker said in an interview. "It really helped me because everybody loves my kids."

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<sup>3</sup> Madsen, "Developing Leadership: Learning from the Experiences of Women Governors," University Press of America (2009): 225

Walker served eight years in the Legislature from 1981 to 1989, one of only seven women of 104 lawmakers during that time.

Her first successful bill changed the way school board candidates are listed on ballots, a change Walker said may seem insignificant, but made a difference. Rather than listing candidate names alphabetically, ballots now place them in a randomly drawn order. The change brought greater fairness to school board elections because voters inclined to choose the first two candidates on the list could no longer choose only the two candidates whose last names start with letters at the beginning of the alphabet, Walker said.

Small advances led to much larger accomplishments. At a time when few women served in the Legislature and none held a leadership role, Walker ascended to several top positions. In her second term, she was named chairwoman of the powerful Appropriations Committee. Her peers elected her assistant majority whip in her third term and majority whip in her fourth term.

“I learned quickly that if you wanted to get things done, you needed to be in leadership,” Walker said.

Walker shepherded dozens of bills to passage, but few would have more lasting impact than the creation of Utah’s Rainy Day Fund to protect state programs during times of economic downturn. Walker considers it her most important legislative accomplishment.

After serving four terms in the Utah House, Walker in 1989 became Utah’s community development director. Her tireless advocacy for affordable housing gained traction during the two years she spent in that position. Today, the Olene Walker Housing Loan Fund continues to foster development of affordable housing for low-income Utahns.

Walker was community development director when Mike Leavitt approached her to join him in his gubernatorial campaign as a candidate for lieutenant governor.

Walker said she was considering running for Congress and had never met Leavitt before he asked her to be his running mate. They met for lunch, and Walker recalls telling him that if they were to be elected, “I wouldn’t just want to cut ribbons and hand out trophies. He said, ‘Fine. That will work because I know people trust you.’”

Walker became Utah's first woman lieutenant governor in 1993. During 11 years in the office, she made good on her goal to be more than a figurehead.

As chairwoman of the state's Health Policy Commission, she oversaw creation of the Children's Health Insurance Program and other critical health policy. Walker also was chairwoman of Utah's Workforce Task Force, a body whose work led to the consolidation of welfare, employment and numerous other programs managed by different state departments into the Utah Department of Workforce Services.

She was elected chairwoman of the National Conference of Lieutenant Governors and was the first lieutenant governor elected president of the National Association of Secretaries of State.

"Olene Walker's leadership style throughout her public career was characterized by even-handed, public-spirited common sense," Leavitt said in a July 10, 2011, *Deseret News* article. "She isn't an ideologue, but it would be a mistake to confuse that with a lack of clarity in her views. Her focus has always been the betterment of Utah, even if that meant political independence ... She will always be seen as trailblazer, not just for women, but for all public servants."<sup>4</sup>

Leavitt's selection by President George W. Bush to head the Environmental Protection Agency led to Walker's swearing in as Utah governor on November 5, 2003.

"I was excited because I could do what I wanted to without getting anyone's permission," Walker said.

With that excitement, though, came great responsibility, not just to all Utahns, but specifically to young women for whom she could be an inspiring role model.

Walker didn't waste a minute as governor in carrying out her ambitious plan. Some of her actions, such as her veto of a public school voucher bill, angered conservative members of the Republican Party. She left office in 2005 after failing to earn her party's support during the Utah State GOP Convention to run for a second term, yet she remains one of Utah's most popular governors ever, having finished her term with an 87 percent approval rating, according to a January 2005 *Deseret Morning News/KSL-TV* survey by Dan Jones & Associates.

In an interview, Walker said she would have liked to serve another term as governor, but she didn't let the defeat end her public service.

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<sup>4</sup> Ghazi Askar, "Olene Walker: Legacy Without an Heir," *Deseret News* (July 10, 2011)

She and her husband, Myron, spent two years in New York City as missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Walker continued her active involvement in numerous political and community organizations, including Count My Vote, an initiative to change Utah's caucus system for selecting candidates, the Utah Debate Commission, and Real Women Run, which works to encourage Utah women to seek elected office.

In 2012, she established the Walker Institute to inspire the future of political engagement and leadership in Utah.

Walker's advice to students who learn and grow through the Walker Institute harkens back to her definition of leadership. She believes people can and should develop leadership skills and lead regardless of their stage in life or the myriad responsibilities they face.

"Look at your life and ask yourself: What do I need to do for my children? What do I need to do for my neighborhood, my community, or my church, regardless of which church I belong to? There are many worthwhile things for people to do. They just need to do them, not just talk about them. Do little things that lead to big things."