Harriett Elizabeth “Liz” Byrd, UW Distinguished Alumna

By Julianne Couch
Alumnus News Editor

Fast Facts:

EDUCATION: BA ’49, Education (West Virginia State College); MA ’76, Education (UW)
OCCUPATION: Retired educator and Wyoming legislator

Harriett Elizabeth “Liz” Byrd is a retired teacher and state legislator who not only taught Wyoming children, she also helped legislators learn about racial equality. A fourth generation Wyominger, Byrd overcame racial discrimination to grow into one of the state’s most respected figures.

After graduating in 1944 from Cheyenne High School, Byrd studied to become a teacher at historically black West Virginia State College. Upon graduation, Byrd returned to Cheyenne but because of her color was denied entry into the Laramie County School District system, despite being one of only a few teaching applicants to hold a college degree, according to her official biography.

Instead, her teaching career began in Cheyenne with a 10-year tenure at the F.E. Warren Air Force Base. In 1959, she was hired by the Laramie County School District and taught elementary school for 27 years in Cheyenne schools. During her teaching career she earned her master’s degree from UW.

In 1980, Byrd was elected to the Wyoming State House of Representatives and was the first African American woman to ever serve in the Wyoming State Legislature. After serving eight years, she ran for and won election to the Wyoming State Senate in 1988, where she served four years. She was the first African American to ever serve in the Wyoming State Senate.

During her legislative career, Liz Byrd was the prime sponsor of legislation to create Wyoming Equality Day, which passed in 1991. Wyoming’s version of this paid holiday honors the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The UW African American and Diaspora Studies program (AADS) has created a speaker series named in Byrd’s honor. The program provides individuals the opportunity to study African people in America and throughout the world with a focus on history, culture, media and life from ancient times to the present day. The Liz Byrd Speaker Series enables the program to bring scholars, educators, politicians, artists and others from around the globe to campus.

AADS director Tracey Owens Patton explains the significance of Byrd’s place in UW’s history.

“Mrs. Byrd is an inspiration not only to those at the University of Wyoming, but throughout the state, and even I say the United States. Through her education, willpower, and determination she conquered obstacles not of her creation, like sexism and racism, and she has made life better for the residents of the state of Wyoming. She has shown to millions of women and girls that women have a place in state and national politics and that their voices should be counted and heard. If it were not for pioneers like Mrs. Byrd, women like me would not have some of the advantages we have today. I am thrilled that the University of Wyoming is recognizing Mrs. Byrd and her accomplishments. This is a remarkable day for her and her family.”

Another faculty member also believes Byrd’s significance to the university will resonate for generations. Gracie Lawson-Borders is an associate professor in the Department of Communication & Journalism, and serves as associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. She said: “Mrs. Byrd is another jewel in the crown of UW alumni who has made a lasting impact on the state. She is an accomplished educator and former state legislator who made a difference in the lives of others. Mrs. Byrd’s family, former students and former colleagues can attest to the difference she has made in their lives and the lives of others. The recognition by UW of Mrs. Byrd is well deserved and an honor for her and her family.”

During her teaching and service in the legislature, and until recently, Byrd has remained active in the Cheyenne community. Some of the organizations and positions are past president of the Golden "K" Kiwanis of Cheyenne; Americanism Department Chairman of the Wyoming American Legion Auxiliary; past president of district 6 American Legion Auxiliary; Wyoming Education Association & National Education

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Harriett Elizabeth
"Liz" Byrd,
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Association life member; Laramie
County Senior Citizens' Advisory Board; Wyoming Guardianship Corporation
Board; KUWR Radio Station Advisory
Board; United Medical Auxiliary life
member; American Legion Auxiliary,
Post 83 life member; Delta Sigma Theta
sorority; Kappa Kappa Iota; NAACP life
member; St. Mary's Cathedral Guild;
Advisor "Boys State" American Legion
Wyoming; Advisor Wyoming Silver
Headed legislature.

Byrd met her future husband James
Byrd while teaching at F.E. Warren AFB.
They married in 1946 and had three
children—Robert, James, Linda—and six
grandchildren.

Gregory C.
Dyekman,
UW Distinguished
Alumnus

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contributions to the law program.
"I suggested to the Wyoming Bar
Association that our students would
benefit from a course in Wyoming law, as
they prepare for the bar exam. Greg took
this suggestion and ran with it. In less
than a month, he had found speakers for
fifteen different essay subjects on the bar
exam."

Dyekman said that after he graduated
and got busy with his practice and with
civic life in Cheyenne, his involvement
with UW waned. That was until he was
in charge of a fundraising event for the
Boy Scouts in Cheyenne with President
Gerald Ford. His presence there had been
noticed by Thyrna (Godfrey) Thomson
(A&S '39), whose son was his law partner
at the time. She asked him directly if he'd
like to attend the next A&S Board of
Visitors meeting with her. "I went to that
meeting with her and loved it. I'm still on
that board, and that led to involvement
with the foundation board and the
establishment of the law school board. It
was that personal contact that got me re-
involved."

Dyekman describes himself as a "big
advocate of the non-profit sector" and as
such has received numerous accolades.
"The one I hold most dear was being
named Person of the Year from the
Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce in
2008. That was a pretty distinguished
group to become part of and it came as a
total surprise to me."

Dyekman said he was very pleased to
be named a UW Distinguished Alumnus.
"I love the people at the university. I have
met so many wonderful administrators,
faculty, students and staff through my
various experiences which have been
enriching to me in a personal way. I learn
a lot every time I'm on campus. I never
go there without wishing I could go back
to school. I think of all the institutions in
Wyoming, the university is the one that
can make the most difference in the lives
of people."

Joseph B. Meyer,
UW Distinguished
Alumnus

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around the nation. Most of them were
elected, rather than appointed, as he had
been. Meyer describes himself as someone
who is not a politician or a "lawyer's
lawyer." Instead, he said, "I don't use
Latin phrases. I am very earthy, using
common words, talking the sort of talk
that people understand. That's the way I
am, I want to convey and communicate in
a common sense way."

Former Wyo. Gov. Dave Freudenthal
summed up Meyer's contributions
to UW and the state. "In his
professional endeavors and his personal
undertakings, Joe has promoted the
University's interests and the affiliation
of its graduates. He made significant
contributions to our profession. He
argued the school finance case before
the Wyoming Supreme Court in 1994.
He was the lead attorney for the 50 state
attorneys general on Indian gambling
and taxation issues. His experience and
wisdom were what led him to be invited
to serve as a guest lecturer for the Rocky
Mountain Mineral Law Foundation and
to be an instructor at the UW College of
Law. Had I been a student there at the
time, I know Joe's class would have been
one of the few I would have made it a
point to attend."

Meyer said he was honored to be
named a UW Distinguished Alumnus.
Considering his slow start in college
life, now he says "I would have loved to
stay in college all my life. UW is my life;
it made me what I am. I firmly believe
that for others like me without a history
of education, UW is one of the best
places to improve your life." Of all his
accomplishments Meyer said his UW
education is the one he is most proud of
and appreciates the most.

Thomas E. Davidson,
UW Medallion
Service Award

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donor support for the student pony
handlers; over $30,000 in scholarships
have been given out. He revitalized the
Ag Appreciation Day barbecue event to
benefit student groups. He created the
Cowboy Joe Pony apparel sold in the
UW Bookstore with proceeds benefitting
student groups and programs.

Davidson grew up in Laramie, on
property that was the UW Livestock
Farm, now the Wyoming Territorial
Prison historic site grounds. As a junior
at UW, he was named Outstanding
Member of the Alpha Tau Alpha
Honorary Association for students in
agriculture, and was its president in his
senior year. He ran track and played
basketball at UW, and says he still has
friends from those days. In fact, it was
through playing high school basketball
that he noticed his future wife Ann
(Charmaine) Davidson (BS '62) who was
at that time a cheerleader for the high
school in Rock Springs, Wyo. "I was very
much aware of her," he said. There's
no way I could be receiving this award if
it had not been for her." Ann is a past
president of the UW Art Museum board.
"What's really special about being on
these UW boards is that Ann and I have
met and worked with some of the best
people in the state of Wyoming."