

Harriett Elizabeth "Liz" Byrd, UW Distinguished Alumna

By Julianne Couch
Alumnews Editor

Fast Facts:

EDUCATION: BA '49, Education (West Virginia State College); MA '76, Education (UW)

OCCUPATION: Retired educator and Wyoming legislator

SELECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS: 1980, elected to the Wyoming State House of Representatives; 1988, elected to the Wyoming State Senate; responsible for passage of Wyoming's "Equality Day."

Harriet 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 Wyomingite, 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, dare I say the United States. Through her education, willpower, and determination

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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



Harriett Elizabeth "Liz" Byrd

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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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 Haired 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. 