

The Hon. Rita Meyer UW Distinguished Alumna

By Julianne Couch
Alumnews Editor

Fast Facts:
EDUCATION: BA '82, Middle School Education; BS '89 Accounting
OCCUPATION: Vice President for Wyoming, Rocky Mountain Power
SELECTED ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Chief of Staff to Gov. Jim Geringer from 1998-2002; Wyoming Air National Guard, Colonel, retired 2007; Wyoming State Auditor 2007-2011; College of Business Outstanding Alumna, 2008; Rep. gubernatorial candidate 2010.

When you've run for political office, your personal story is oft-repeated in the news. So says Rita Meyer, who has had her share of high profile positions and aspirations. But her story is one of determination and success not often achieved. That is what makes her someone whose personal history bears repeating.

Meyer grew up on a ranch in the Nebraska sand hills. She got her early education in a one-room school house, then in a nearby town, population 80. The high school she attended, in nearby Ainsworth, was the only one in the county. Even so, only 69 students were in her graduating class. So she's used to the rural life, to say the least. In 1969 she moved to Omaha, Neb., where she went to school for dental assistant training, and began teaching in that program. She met her future husband, Charles Meyer, who was a dentist. In 1977 they moved to Centennial, Wyo. "My friends in Omaha couldn't believe I was moving to Wyoming. They thought I was a city girl."

Dr. Meyer was a fourth generation Wyomingite and had a dental practice in Laramie, but Rita Meyer didn't have a four-year degree. "My mother didn't have much education. I knew that was my ticket to escape from an environment that didn't have a lot of promise for me." Meyer said she chose her education major "by default rather by planning. I hadn't focused on the totality of career and my best capabilities."

Meyer said when she started her student teaching, she realized that being a classroom teacher wasn't the best choice for her or for her future students. She doesn't regret choosing that major. "So many wonderful things would not have been possible without a degree, working with the faculty and staff there." In addition, she said the teaching methodologies she learned have helped her through her career with a lot of the young men and women under her command in the military.

Meyer went on to earn an accounting degree from UW. She also has an MBA in International Business from Regis University in Denver and a Master's degree in National Resource Strategy from National Defense University in Washington D.C.

"I always wanted to join the military, but my dad said it was no place for a girl. When I grew up we respected what our parents said. There were not a lot of career opportunities open for women in the military when I graduated high school. Women weren't accepted into military academies. When I decided to enter I was married, with a child." She said it was a "family decision" for her to enter as an enlisted airman and officer in the Wyoming Air National Guard.

"My larger career choices have always been family discussions, a give and take conversation about costs to our family. My husband would have to take care of the family and the household while I was away. I was so grateful for the wonderful support of my family."

Since entering the military in 1974, Meyer's assignments have included Mission Support Group Commander, Executive Officer, Comptroller, Strategic Planning officer (at the Pentagon), Personnel Programs Officer and Aero Medical Operations Officer. She attained the rank of full Colonel in 2004. She served as Commander, 153rd Mission Support Group from 2001-2007 and is a combat veteran. She was deployed in support of Operation Desert Storm, Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Enduring Freedom. She retired in 2007.

These days she works for Rocky Mountain Power as the Vice President for Wyoming. She oversees state business plans, customer service, community relations, and helps with regulator and legislative activities. "This is a new career for me, one I never imagined embarking



Rita Meyer

on. I am learning a lot about the utility industry." Although Cheyenne is not part of the company's service area, she spends some of her time in an office there to be closer to the policy issues. She also has an office in Casper.

In addition, she has been able to "give back" at UW by serving on various boards. In 1995-96, she was on the UW Board of Trustees. "This was an important role and I learned a lot more about UW. I was honored to serve." Meyer was also on the College of Business Advisory board and the UW Foundation board.

Former First Lady Nancy Freudenthal said of Meyer: "Rita's public service tenure is diverse and admirable, and she is certainly worthy of this recognition. As a public official, she spoke to groups throughout the state, although she was not required to do so. I particularly appreciated her powerful message of giving back to our communities, volunteerism, and public service. Her resume shows she walks her talk, an attribute we in Wyoming respect and appreciate, and an important quality of a true Distinguished Alumna."

UW Distinguished Alumna Martha B. Wyrsh said: "Rita has served our nation in the Wyoming Air National Guard and has earned many honors through this work, but she did not un-

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dertake the difficult task for the glory. She took on the challenges and rigors of the military because Rita cares deeply about our country, and our freedoms. She cares just as deeply about the State of Wyoming she where she has served in government in many different positions."

Although Meyer's public life is exceptionally so, her private life, while active, is what she calls "quiet." Her husband passed away in 2011, and

her son Charlie is married, living in Baltimore. "Family time is important to me. I'm protective of the private side of my life," she said. Meyer ticks off a short list of details people might not know about her. "I love the music of Luciano Pavarotti and Patsy Cline equally well. I delight in watching barroom brawls in old John Wayne movies as much as I enjoy watching a Russian ballet. My preferred shopping experience is not in a clothing store but rather a hardware

store."

Meyer said she was in "shock and awe" when she learned she'd been named a UW Distinguished Alumna. "I'm always happy but never fully satisfied with my personal and professional accomplishments. I look back at past recipients and the important places they hold, the things they've done, their service through corporate and public jobs or other pursuits. I was humbled to be chosen." ♪