

Polly Holmes: Proponent of Clean Indoor Air

Polly Holmes was an activist and a writer, but she was perhaps best known for her crusade for nonsmokers during her time in the Montana Legislature.

Pauline Mudge was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1922. At only 16, she became a licensed pilot. When World War II broke out, she served the military by teaching navigation to new pilots.

Later, she worked for the National Board of the Methodist Church in Nebraska, writing and producing educational materials. She hired Bob Holmes in 1951 to narrate a filmstrip, and married him three months later. He began a career as a Methodist minister, which later brought them to Montana. During the 50's and 60's, Polly Holmes wrote plays and a novel, taught writing at Rocky Mountain College, and counseled teens, along with raising her own three children.

Holmes was elected to the Montana House as a Democrat from Billings in 1972. She served in the Legislature for four terms, from 1973 through 1979. During her time in the House, she was outspoken on a number of issues such as prison reform and measures to aid the poor.

In 1964, the Surgeon General released a landmark report on the dangers of smoking, and cigarettes had been required to carry a warning statement beginning in 1970. The dangers of second-hand smoke to nonsmokers were not yet documented, and those with respiratory issues or who disliked smoke around them were subjected to tobacco in nearly all public spaces. Holmes was the first in Montana to introduce legislation to limit smoking in public places to designated areas in 1973. The bill was killed on a vote of 56-43. She renewed her attempt in 1975. Her opponents, male and female, responded by lighting up cigars in the House chamber while she spoke. Holmes responded by donning a medical mask and carrying on, declaring herself a fan of oxygen. The bill died in a Senate committee. In 1977, she changed her approach, and introduced legislation to require restaurants and other public facilities to provide separate spaces for nonsmokers. Holmes was vice-chair of the House Public Health, Welfare and Safety Committee that year, but her proposal left her own committee with a "Do Not Pass" recommendation after a lengthy hearing.

In 1979, after a demonstration in front of the Capitol by nonsmokers, a Republican colleague carried the bill, which finally passed. It was the first state legislation to address the rights of nonsmokers, and required non-smoking areas in public vehicles, elevators, health care facilities, restaurants and other public spaces. The laws about tobacco use have evolved over the years, culminating in the Montana Clean Indoor Air Act some 25 years later, which banned smoking in all workplaces in the state.



Polly Holmes

The family moved to Helena in 1981, when Bob Holmes became minister at St. Paul's United Methodist Church.

Holmes was also a columnist who made frequent contributions to several Montana newspapers, generally writing about social justice issues. She corresponded tirelessly with prison inmates, both men and women, and worked for the development of pre-release centers to ease inmates return into their communities. She was awarded the Belle Winestine Award by the Montana Women's Lobby in 1996, and in 2003, the Montana ACLU awarded Holmes their Jeannette Rankin Award to recognize a lifetime's work for social justice.

Polly Holmes lived to see the 2005 Clean Indoor Air Act enacted, passing away in Helena later that year in November.

Sources:

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