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The Scribbler: Proud member of the Betty Burke Party

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By Henry Briggs

I don't know 139 people, and if I did, I doubt they would get together to celebrate me unless they are all creditors.

Last Saturday 139 people gathered at the Desmond Hotel in Malvern to celebrate Betty Burke: mother, grandmother, librarian, nurse, Scout leader, tax collector, Republican committeewoman. Patti Rossiter organizes the lunch, which is paid for by all 139. There isn't a creditor in the bunch, although all 139 (not to mention many more) owe Betty, big time.

They celebrate 90 years of a woman who does more for others – on a daily basis – than for herself.

This is the glue that binds them: Betty's good deeds. To be sure, she bruises a few egos from time to time, as she forges a reputation for toughness as well as honor in doing the right thing. But the bruises fade as the deeds blossom.

Former Rep. Carol Rubley is there. Former Sen. Earl Baker leads the celebration. Jim McErlane, Rep. Duane Milne, former Delaware County DA Pat Meehan, Supreme Court Justice Bill Lamb and other pillars of the Republican Party are at the table next to Betty's. Betty makes a joke at Lamb's expense, something few others would dare. "Be careful, Betty," jokes Lamb standing up. "I'm right behind you!"

Milne tells of his first, knee-shaking interview with a woman who, for 40 or more years, is a major political force in Chester County. He passes muster.

She enters politics in 1971 the old-fashioned way: fighting a town government she considers corrupted by builders who want to fill the town's open spaces with hundreds of apartments. Most people in that spot would keep their heads down, figuring you can't fight the system. Betty fights. She rallies neighbors who rally their neighbors. The Malvern Council schedules a zoning hearing just before Christmas, thinking Betty and others with children will stay home. Wrong. Betty fills the Borough Hall. The fight goes to Commonwealth Court, where a compromise is pushed through. But in the next election a big chunk of the Council is tossed, and, in two more cycles the whole government is replaced.

She graduates from nursing school in 1941 and, like many of the best at that time, is quickly made a nursing instructor: how else can you build a great nursing staff in time of war? Later, at St. Luke's, she convinces the hospital to pay nurses to take college courses – a revolutionary idea at the time (what, educate nurses?). She continues in nursing, working for Malvern's Doc Lewis until they both retire a few years ago.

In 1949, when she and Sam move into Malvern with their kids, she learns the Malvern Library has no children's reading program. So she starts "Story Time," a program that is still flourishing and a leading attraction for Malvern. That leads to a long-held position on the Chester County Library Board.

She is elected borough tax collector and holds the job for decades because she does more than collect taxes; she helps the elderly and others fill out the maze-like forms.

State Sen. Andrew Dinniman, Lyn Doherty, Frank Ortner and other high-profile Democrats are also at the luncheon. In an era of bitter partisanship, Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell sends congratulations as do other state leaders of both parties.

Dinniman tells of a finance meeting in Harrisburg at which someone proposes doing away with the tax-collector position: too antiquated, he claims. Dinniman stops the idea cold by telling them about Betty Burke's work in Malvern. The luncheon is filled with similar anecdotes and appreciation.

Later Dinniman praises Betty's collegiality and offers the only political moment of the day. "I'm not a Democrat or Republican," he says. "I'm a proud member of the Betty Burke Party."

The sentiment is seconded and voted on unanimously with sustained applause.

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