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Helen Holt: A Centenarian's Reflections on a Lifetime of Public Service

Administrative Profile

Abstract: *Women have made great strides in the past 100 years. As the iconic cigarette commercial told us almost 50 years ago, "You've come a long way, baby!" Yet women are still underrepresented in the highest leadership ranks, including state and federal office. Before being asked to "lean in" or share valuable insights, a small group of very capable women were leaders long before those two words were seen in the same sentence. One such remarkable woman, Helen Holt, was a "servant-leader" throughout her illustrious and inspiring career as a member of West Virginia's House of Delegates, then as secretary of state (1957–58), and later as a presidential appointee charged with developing the nation's nursing home system. Holt's work in state and federal government, her appointment by seven U.S. presidents to develop and implement the national nursing home program that is still in use today, and her leadership in civic and nonprofit organizations have made her an inspiration to countless women and men.*

In 1957, June Cleaver was a prominent figure on the American television series *Leave It to Beaver*.¹ An upper-middle-class woman, she exemplified the social norms of a suburban housewife in the mid-twentieth century. She cared for her husband and two children, cooked, cleaned, and was content with her pastimes of needlepoint and cake decorating. It was not common for suburban women during this era to be employed outside the home or to have scholarly or professional work lives.

Helen Holt became West Virginia's first female secretary of state in the same year that *Leave It to Beaver* debuted. Although Holt admitted that she was not a feminist and railed against "women's lib," today she is a role model for women leaders, especially as a public servant and educator. At the time she served as West Virginia's secretary of state, only 37 other women nationwide had held the office in the 37 years since women achieved suffrage in 1920. Only two other states within the Appalachian region, Kentucky and Alabama, had female secretaries of state during that same period. In West Virginia, it would be almost 50 years after Holt left office before another woman would hold executive office (Kunz and Staton 2013).²

After serving in West Virginia, Holt's commitment to public service took her to Washington, D.C., where she worked under seven U.S. presidents to develop the comprehensive nursing home and housing system for

the elderly that is currently in use. She was initially appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom she had met while serving in the West Virginia legislature. Eisenhower looked to Holt to reform the meager support programs that were in place at the time. Her work in state legislative and executive office, and especially her subsequent experience as assistant commissioner of public institutions, a position that oversaw women's prisons and elder care facilities in the state, made her particularly well suited to take on this monumental task. Throughout her career, Holt was active in civic organizations and women's groups and worked to further the careers of other women. She even inspired her son to take on national office: Rush Holt, Jr., was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives (D-NJ) in 1999.³

Like June Cleaver, Holt was married, had children, and was very much a well-groomed lady. Unlike June, however, Holt lost her husband after 15 years of marriage, becoming a single mother at the age of 42. She earned a college degree and had a varied and highly successful career in public service. She never considered herself a trailblazer, yet she consistently took on positions and assignments in which she had to create the rules as she went along. Now 102 years old, Holt continues to serve and teach others with the same passion and dedication that ruled her life.

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The Early Years

Helen Louise Froelich was born in Gridley, a rural community in

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central Illinois, on August 16, 1913, to William and Edna Froelich, second-generation immigrants from the Alsace region of Germany. The Froelich family was very patriotic.⁴ Holt learned the importance of public service early on from her father, who was mayor of the small town where they lived for more than 20 years. “He presided over the paving of the streets and creation of a central water system. He bought houses, renovated them and rented them out; when the tenants paid an amount equivalent to the value of the houses, he signed over title to them so they could own their own homes” (Rush Holt for U.S. Senate 2013). Holt always voted in political elections and recalled her first time voting as a very special occasion.

This small-town girl became a trailblazer early in life as one of the 3.9 percent of women in the country who completed a baccalaureate degree.⁵ As valedictorian of her senior high school class and the only woman who went on to college, Holt wanted to attend Northwestern University. However, a recruiter from Stephens College in Missouri had a meeting with William Froelich that sealed the deal for Holt’s college plans. “I never had any special ambition. ... I knew I’d go to school and keep learning, but back then about all a girl could do is be a teacher” (Holt 2013a, 2013b).

After obtaining an associate’s degree at Stephens College, Holt transferred to Northwestern University to complete her bachelor’s degree in science in 1934. She was recruited back to Stephens College for her first professional job—setting up a science library. She became head of the science department at Stephens in 1935 and stayed there until 1937, taking additional training at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Massachusetts in 1936. The following year, Holt earned her master of science degree in zoology from Northwestern University and began her appointment as a biology instructor at National Park College, a private girls’ school in Maryland, where she worked and lived for three years.

In June 1941, Holt married U.S. Senator Rush Dew Holt, Sr., a Democrat from West Virginia. Senator Holt was known as “the ‘boy senator’ from West Virginia, the youngest man in history to be elected to the U.S. Senate—and the model for Jimmy Stewart’s character in the classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*”⁶ (Rush Holt for U.S. Senate 2013). At the end of Senator Holt’s term, the couple moved to Weston, West Virginia. They had two biological children: Helen Jane was born in 1945, and Rush, Jr., was born in 1948. Later, the couple adopted their nephew, David, after both of his adoptive parents passed away. Holt worked side by side with her husband in his quest for public office until his death in 1954. The *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* (n.d.) describes Rush Sr.’s Congressional career as follows:

[E]lected to the State house of delegates in 1942, 1944, 1946, and 1948; unsuccessful candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in 1944 and for the 1948 Democratic nomination for United States Senator; engaged in research work; changed party affiliation in 1949 and was an unsuccessful Republican candidate for election to the Eighty-second Congress in 1950, and for election as Governor in 1952; elected to the State house of delegates in 1954 and served until his death.

Holt was not unlike other women in public service of her era who were given an opportunity for elected office as a result of the death of a spouse.

Becoming a Public Servant

When Rush, Sr., served in the West Virginia House of Delegates in 1954–55, Holt often assisted him. She was not only a wife but also “a true political partner.” She got to know other members of the legislature and commented that she enjoyed working behind the scenes with her husband on important issues of the day (Holt 2013a, 2013b). After her husband’s untimely death from cancer in 1955, Holt was asked to complete her husband’s unexpired term by Governor William Marland. Before his death, Delegate Holt had petitioned the governor to choose her as his replacement and encouraged his wife to take the job when offered. She agreed and took office as a single mother of three children, becoming at that time one of 321 female state representatives nationwide (Beyer 1957).

As this was a time in history when very few women served in such capacities, it is interesting to understand the working relationship between Holt and her male colleagues in the House of Delegates. When asked whether she was *accepted* as a member of the legislature, Holt responded, “I knew the people—they accepted me—they were very nice and the men were always courteous” (Holt 2013b).

Moreover, how Holt accomplished her work being one of very few women in government is noteworthy. “I knew ... the smart ones [men] and where to find out things, so I always made it a point to talk with them. But when I wanted to get something done, if it was my idea, I’d sort of plant it with somebody who could go ahead with it and then I’d help him and let him get the credit. And that was always the way to get things done—if you didn’t care who got the credit” (Holt 2013a, 2013b). While in office, Holt was in constant communication with her constituents, attending luncheons, speaking at various nonprofit and fraternal organizations, and attending events given in her honor, often receiving awards for her diligence in representing her constituents.⁷

Learning about the circuitous route that Holt took to get goals accomplished, the authors asked her whether she felt that she was treated as an equal during her time as a member of the House of Delegates. Knowing that she was not given credit for her own ideas, was she ever on par with her contemporaries? She explained that she was respected and accepted as the wife of a former delegate. “They accepted me as Rush’s wife. And they knew that he trusted me and ... I had learned from him and so they did respect me. They really did.” She went on to say that being treated as a lady and being respected were not the same things as being treated as an equal. “But I didn’t care—I appreciated being accepted.” Intrigued, the interviewers asked whether she was thought of as a proxy for her late husband. “Sort of—yeah. At that point I was his widow. I didn’t get to be Helen Holt until I became secretary of state. All the time before, I was Mrs. Rush Holt” (Holt 2013b).

Holt was not unlike other women in public service of her era who were given an opportunity for elected office as a result of the death of a spouse. “For many years, a husband’s death was a woman’s path into public office” (Andrade 2007).⁸ When her term was up, rather than run for reelection, Holt chose to run as a delegate to the Republican

National Convention, leading the ticket as a delegate at-large. Her overwhelming success at being elected prompted Governor Cecil Underwood to appoint Holt to serve as secretary of state of West Virginia after the unexpected death of Daniel Pitt O'Brien, the elected official at the time. At first, she was hesitant, but the governor implored her, saying, "Helen, you have to do this and the people want you and I need you and the state needs you" (Holt 2013b). At the coaxing of the governor, she took the position. "It wasn't that I was afraid of the job, I just hadn't wanted to get into that. I had little children" (Holt 2013b).

Taking on State Executive Office

During her one-year term, Holt wanted to demonstrate honesty and hard work. "So I thought when I went into the secretary of state, I'm going to show you *can* be honest in politics and I could still be a lady and be in politics. Because as I said, they, a lot of people, felt you had to be more mannish." Asked to define what she meant about being a lady in politics, Holt described her role as different from that of a man and more in line with how women were seen during that era. What did it mean—to be a lady in politics? "Well, to keep my place, I guess, and not try to be a man. Not try to do as the man did. Just to do things my own way. Women had to work a little harder than the men" (Holt 2013b).

It is worth noting that "the ideological and institutional constraints of 1950s American society had a significant impact on the construction of women's identities during this time period" (Jennifer Holt n.d.). As the soldiers returned home from World War II, the Rosie the Riveters and other women who were needed in the workplace found themselves displaced. Concepts of the ideal woman spread through popular culture to substantiate this discrimination against women. "Studies of postwar culture found that government propaganda, popular magazines, and films reinforced traditional concepts of femininity and instructed women to subordinate their interests to those of returning male veterans" (Meyerowitz 1994, cited by Jennifer Holt n.d., 2–3).

These perceptions and expectations provided the underpinnings for the gender roles that dominated Holt's time in office. Social role theory explains that "in general, prejudice toward female leaders follows from the incongruity that many people perceive between the characteristics of women and the requirements of leader roles" (Eagly and Karau 2002, 576).

A key proposition of social role theory is that the majority of these beliefs about the sexes pertain to *communal* and *agentic* attributes (Bakan 1996; Eagly 1987). Communal characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to women, describe primarily a concern with the welfare of other people—for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle. In contrast, agentic characteristics, which are ascribed more strongly to men, describe primarily an assertive, controlling, and confident tendency—for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader (Eagly and Karau 2002, 574).

For Holt, to be ladylike was the antithesis of being a leader. Yet throughout her term as



Helen Holt, West Virginia secretary of state, with the governor, other state executive officers, and members of the Board of Public Works. Photo courtesy of the West Virginia and Regional History Center.

secretary of state, she strove to show that women could lead without giving up their femininity.

According to Holt, no one in the state house seemed to know exactly what the roles and responsibilities of the office entailed (Holt 2013b). There was no written job description or specific job expectations. She discovered that she was responsible for some important things, including understanding and enforcing election laws and procedures and monitoring other state government operating procedures and budgets, all of which she took seriously. She changed the way the entire office functioned to improve accountability. This required her to "clean house" of some long-term employees who were basically nonfunctional. She also endeavored to establish much closer communication with the people. She accepted many speaking engagements and began a secretary of state news column explaining elections laws and procedures in terms that laymen could understand. She also worked to establish bipartisan relationships that improved the functionality of her office (e-mail message from John Cuthbert, director of the West Virginia and Regional History Center at West Virginia University Library, to Karen Kunz, March 5, 2015).

Holt used her love of learning and the skills she acquired in college and as a teacher to learn everything she could about the office. She noted that "she learned while doing" and wanted to educate the public along the way. When she started writing a weekly column, her first topic was election law. In one of her many speaking engagements, she spoke to a local Rotary Club about the state

seal—the secretary of state is the keeper of the state seal and is responsible for its use on state documents—and the men in attendance (women were not allowed to join the Rotary Club at the time) found it very interesting. She continued to advocate for general education, an issue of concern to her since her days

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as a legislator, arguing that one could not be effective as a citizen or in life without an education.

The learning curve was steep, and Holt always wanted to do her best. As secretary of state, she spoke all over the state. Sometimes her “best” was letting others know that she was quite capable and competent. “As a woman it was a novelty so every place wanted me to speak. . . . women weren’t serving in politics” (Holt 2013a, 2013b). She never thought about being a trailblazer: “I was just doing a job that was given to me to do and I felt that the Lord put me there and I had to do it. . . . Of course it was my nature to do the best possible job that I could do” (Holt 2013a, 2013b).

Holt offered her thoughts about the differences between serving as a representative in the House of Delegates and as a member of the state’s executive branch. “The executive has to be a leader and has to come up with the ideas. As a member . . . they would be a follower and should fit into a group. . . . not that an executive shouldn’t, too, as they have to work with other people. . . . and there are a lot of people in the House that take leadership positions.” Of her time as secretary of state, Holt declared, “I felt like I was accomplishing something all the time” (Holt 2013a). She was also grateful to the public for their support. “I felt my biggest compliment was the fact that the people of West Virginia accepted me” (Holt 2013b).

Although Holt served as a gubernatorial appointee for an entire year as secretary of state, her legacy was not celebrated. Her name was included in the West Virginia Blue Book for 1958, but neither biographical information nor a picture was provided. Holt believes this may have been an intentional slight (Holt 2013b). The Blue Book “is a comprehensive record of all levels of government in West Virginia” (Lilly 2010). In the years preceding and following Holt’s term, there were biographies as well as pictures of the men who held the position of secretary of state.

By virtue of her role as secretary of state, Holt served on the West Virginia Board of Public Works,⁹ the state’s executive authority at the time (it was replaced with the chief executive structure by constitutional amendment in 1968). Her appointment eliminated the Democratic majority in the board’s composition, shifting power toward the governor. This was a considerable role and considerable power for a woman in late 1950s West Virginia.

Holt accomplished many things during her time in state government. As a delegate and as secretary of state, she was a tireless advocate for education through her committee work, her writings, and numerous visits to constituents across the state. Through her efforts to educate them about the differing roles and responsibilities of her two offices and the importance of their engagement in the political process, she also served as a role model for women, providing a visual of a “lady” politician. She served in two distinct branches of government and was in the powerful position of having the deciding vote, at times, as a member of the state’s earliest executive management team while on the Board of Public Works. Yet she noted that one of the most exciting duties of her statewide office was welcoming President Eisenhower when he visited West Virginia in 1958. He was “easy to be with,” she said of the president (Holt 2013b). The meeting was fortuitous for Holt and foreshadowed a future connection with the president.

The Shift to Federal Service

Holt’s bid for election as secretary of state in 1958 was unsuccessful, and she attributed that to her lack of effort in campaigning. “I never campaigned. I didn’t know how to. I didn’t ask people to vote for me. I felt if they liked what I was saying they would vote for me” (Holt 2013a, 2013b). Afterward, Governor Underwood once again appointed Holt to a leadership position within state government, this time as the state’s assistant commissioner of public institutions. In this capacity, from 1959 through 1960, she worked with homes for the elderly, the women’s prison, and the state penitentiary. She developed a strong interest in nursing homes while in this position and became adept at making them effective businesses, making a name for herself in the process.

Having firsthand knowledge of the burgeoning new business of nursing homes and caring for the elderly population, Holt again changed careers, using the skills she had developed on the job. In 1960, President Eisenhower invited her to the White House to offer her a position in Washington, D.C., with the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Her post was to be special assistant to the commissioner, and she would be charged with developing a federal nursing home program. In accepting this post, Holt joined the ranks of 175 women appointed by President Eisenhower between 1953 and 1959 (Republican National Committee 1959). This post provided Holt with the opportunity to take the knowledge she had acquired in West Virginia and apply it at the national level.

In taking the job, she was once again on her own. Holt recalled that when she started her new position, the director told her that no one knew anything about what she was expected to do. She was charged with creating and developing the program from scratch by working with state and local governments as well as contractors, architects, designers, and others in order to provide a template for professionals to use to duplicate her efforts. She didn’t know where to begin. “People were clamoring for help . . . I had to be ready to serve where people needed me” (Holt 2013b).

As Holt began traveling across the United States talking about design standards for nursing homes, she knew she needed a uniform process. She kept a journal—a collection of notes made by her and the architects, contractors, and other men involved in the project—of how exactly a nursing home should be created as they completed her first project, a prototype developed in Pineville, West Virginia. Because Holt had many contacts in the capital city of Charleston and had worked with this topic, it was logical for her to use West Virginia as the test site. Her manual “was very rough, some of it was in the men’s handwriting.”

It was weeks, maybe months later a man came into my office and said, “I’m head of the Technical Standards Department, and I just wanted you to know we’re working on a handbook for you. And it’ll be ready in so many weeks.” And I said, “Oh thank you! That’s just what we need.” I never knew whether he knew that I had made one and been handing it out all these weeks or whether he was telling me I had overstepped my job description, or whether he didn’t know and was just being helpful. But anyway, it was fun. Pretty soon their booklet came, and it was very neatly tied, and a good book. (Holt 2013a, 2013b)

Holt’s role in federal service advanced through the terms of seven sitting U.S. presidents. Between 1960 and 1983, she personally met and was asked to work for Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan. It is notable that Holt served under such diverse administrations within and between the political parties. This remarkable feat was accomplished before the term “breaking the glass ceiling” was even coined.

After five years of successful accomplishments as special assistant to the commissioner at the FHA, in 1965, Holt was appointed director of mortgage insurance for nursing homes in the newly created U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD had absorbed the FHA, so for Holt, the new appointment was more a promotion than a move to a new department. A few years later, she was again promoted, this time to the post of assistant to the secretary in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; she served in that role from 1970 to 1980.

In the spring of 1974, Secretary Lynn appointed long time FHA employee, Mrs. Helen Holt, to be the new Assistant for Elderly and Handicapped, and directed that the Office, now fully staffed, be the focal point within HUD for all matters pertaining to housing and related facilities and services for the elderly and handicapped, and advise the Secretary on such matters. (U.S. Senate 1975, 243)

A few years later, Holt’s responsibilities as assistant to the secretary were described in a 1976 Senate hearing report on the “Study of the Problems of the Aged and Aging”:

The Department of Housing and Urban Development, which first established the position of Assistant to the Secretary for Elderly and Handicapped in the immediate office of the Secretary in 1972, has continued to demonstrate its special concern for the needs of the older Americans by undertaking a number of significant initiatives to strengthen and expand the scope of the activities of the Office of the Assistant to the Secretary, Programs for the Elderly and Handicapped.

Secretary Hills has maintained as her Assistant for Elderly and Handicapped Mrs. Helen Holt.. . . Responsibilities specifically assigned by the Secretary include: reviewing the adequacy of pertinent HUD policies and procedures and participating in their development or revision, participating in planning for the inspection and evaluation of HUD assisted housing for the elderly, coordinating activities within HUD affecting the elderly and handicapped, and representing HUD) in meetings with other Federal, State, and municipal or private organizations on matters affecting the elderly.

In order to help the Assistant to the Secretary for the Elderly and Handicapped carry out her responsibilities, an Intradepartmental Task Force on the Elderly has been provided. The members of this task force represent each of the operating divisions of the Department, and they meet at least once a month to discuss major issues relating to the elderly. (U.S. Senate 1976)

While at FHA and then at HUD, Holt testified countless times before numerous congressional committees. Building on her

testimony on the aged and aging in the United States that she gave to the West Virginia legislature’s Committee on Labor and Public Welfare in Charleston in 1959, Holt testified at more than a dozen House and Senate subcommittee and committee hearings between 1961 and 1981. Table 1 lists the committees before which Holt testified and the subject matter of her testimonies.

Holt enjoyed considerable success in her efforts to ensure federally sponsored housing for the elderly that met their needs while being cost-effective for both the residents and the government. Traveling the nation, she worked with communities to develop nursing homes for the elderly and disabled and was photographed at ribbon cuttings and interviewed about her efforts by local newspapers around the country. Holt also took every opportunity to help members of Congress understand the concerns of the elderly and the importance of access to adequate health care for those who could not care for themselves. In 1974, she told members of a subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, “In the early days, people did not think about the special features that the elderly needed, and each year we learn new things and put in new types of facilities” (U.S. House of Representatives 1974, 381).

She was also proud that the mortgage insurance program she designed was self-sustaining and did not cost the taxpayers any money. The significance of her commitment is illustrated even today by HUD’s flagship program, one of the first programs that Holt developed while at the FHA, where she “help[ed] to write the regulations for the 202 program” (U.S. House of Representatives 1974, 381).

Table 1 Helen Holt, 20 Years of Legislative Testimony, 1961–81

Year	Legislative Committee	Topic
1961	Senate Subcommittee on Federal and State Activities	Problems of the Aging
	Special Committee on Aging	
1963	House Committee on Veterans Affairs	Intermediate Care for Veterans
	Special Subcommittee on Intermediate Care	
	Senate Joint Subcommittee on Long-term Care	Long-Term Institutional Care for the Aged
	Special Committee on Aging	
1974	House Subcommittee of the Committee of Government Operations	Specialized Housing and Alternatives to Institutionalization
	Senate Special Committee on Aging	The Impact of Rising Energy Costs on Older Americans
1975	Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs	Oversight of HUD Housing programs
	House Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests	HUD’s Response to the Housing Needs of Senior Citizens
	Select Committee on Aging	
	Senate Committee on Aging	Special Report: Developments in Aging
1976	House Committee on Banking, Currency and Housings	Housing Authorization Act of 1976
	House Subcommittee on Housing and Community Development	
	Select Committee on Aging	Elderly Crime Victimization (Residential Security)
	House Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests	Elderly Housing Overview: HUDs Inaction
1978	Senate Special Committee on Aging	Single Room Occupancy: A need for national concern
1981	House Select Committee on Aging	Oversight of the White House Conference on Aging: A Preconference Assessment

HUD operates five programs that designate assisted housing developments for either low-income elderly residents alone, or low-income elderly residents and residents with disabilities. The primary HUD program that provides housing for low-income elderly households is the Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly program ... it is the only HUD program that currently provides housing exclusively for elderly residents. (Perl 2014, 1)

Holt took pride in the dedication she brought to her work, telling members of the Senate Committee on Aging in 1975, “by every available measure of housing conditions, the elderly have experienced significant and substantial improvements in their housing during the last decade” (U.S. Senate 1975).

Three years later she reminded those same committee members,

In 1949, the Congress declared that the general welfare and security of the Nation, and the health and living standards of its people, require housing production and related community development sufficient to eliminate substandard and other inadequate housing and bring about the realization, as soon as feasible, of the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family. Neither the Congress nor the Department of Housing and Urban Development has ever waived from that declaration. In fact, it has been reaffirmed many times by both the legislative and executive branches of our Government.

The problems of aging in general, and the myriad housing needs of the elderly in particular, are continual concerns of my Department. ... The mandate of my Department is to work toward the provision of a decent housing and suitability living environment. We have interpreted this to mean a quality living environment—one which does not impinge on the basic dignity to which each individual, regardless of his economic capacity, is entitled.

We, therefore, feel our obligation is not to subsidize or encourage the establishment of a housing environment which is in any way inferior in those standards of quality which our society has come to expect from the public as well as the private sector. (U.S. Senate 1978)

Holt made quite a name for herself during her work at HUD. She was considered such an expert on the needs of the elderly that shortly after his inauguration, President Ronald Reagan elevated her to special advisor for consumer affairs and the elderly at HUD, where she worked until her retirement from federal service in 1983.

Holt’s legacy lives on in the contemporary impacts of the program she established while at HUD. A Congressional Research Service study notes,

Among current issues involving Section 202 housing for elderly residents is the need to rehabilitate and modernize aging structures. One way in which property owners may obtain funds for improving

their properties is by refinancing, paying off the Section 202 loan, and making use of equity in the property. The Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly Act (P.L. 111-372) removed one of the impediments to the ability of owners of older Section 202 developments to refinance and make improvements. Under previous law, owners could only refinance into loans with lower interest rates and reduced debt service—the oldest Section 202 developments (those funded prior to 1974) were financed with low interest rate loans, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to enter into a new loan with a lower interest rate and reduced debt service. These owners can now refinance as long as they address the physical needs of the property. In addition to P.L. 111-372’s refinancing provisions, the law authorized “Senior Preservation Rental Assistance” for use in cases of refinancing, and established a new category of housing with services within the Assisted Living Conversion Program called “Service Enriched Housing.” (Perl 2014, 1)

Holt and her work are noted in hearing transcripts, reports, and issues of the *Congressional Record*. One such record contains the testimony on the Senate floor of West Virginia senator Robert C. Byrd on the occasion of Holt’s retirement from federal service. In his speech, Senator Byrd noted Holt’s extracurricular accomplishments in addition to all that she had accomplished as a public servant.

Mrs. Holt continues to be active in civic affairs. She has served as a member of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service and as a delegate to a number of boards and advisory council on housing and aging. She has been district, State, or national president of a variety of organizations, including the AAUW [American Association of University Women], the Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs, the West Virginia State Society, and Executive Women in Government. (Byrd 1983, 22779)

To commemorate these and other contributions, Holt was recognized by The International Alliance of Women (TIAW) in 2008 as one of the 50 most exceptional women in the world. “The TIAW World of Difference Award recognizes extraordinary individuals whose efforts have advanced the economic empowerment of women locally, regionally or worldwide” (TIAW 2014).

The Secrets of Her Success

When asked about Helen Holt, people who know her tended to use the same descriptors, noting that she is humble and gracious, always with a can-do attitude, as well as brilliant and unassuming. At her retirement, Senator Byrd called her “a very charming and gracious woman who wins friends and admirers wherever she goes” (1983, 22779).

Nurturing Relationships

Throughout her career, relationship building was supremely important to Holt. She had a deferential, collaborative style; getting a job done well was more important to her than getting credit for doing it. She worked primarily with men, so she made a point, beginning in her days in the West Virginia legislature,

Holt’s legacy lives on in the contemporary impacts of the program she established while at HUD.

of getting to know the wives. As a young widow, Holt thought there was a moral imperative to build relationships with these women. She continued to show a personal interest in her constituents and colleagues throughout her career in state and federal public service. She wanted to know everyone around her—an attribute that she continues to demonstrate to this day. Not surprisingly, Holt knows all of the wives of the presidents under whom she served.

One of her son's favorite stories about his mother's talent for relationship building is about when Vice President Joe Biden became a senator. On his first day in the chamber, he announced that he was the youngest senator on record; Holt waited for just the right moment to inform him that her late husband had held that distinction. Over the years, while working together, Senator Biden and Holt developed a strong respect and friendship. Then, several years ago (and more than 20 years after Holt's retirement), Congressman Rush Holt, Jr., was standing in a receiving line at a holiday party being held at the vice president's residence. When he got to the front of the line, Vice President Biden asked him about his mother. Congressman Holt replied that he had just talked with her, and Biden immediately asked, "Can we call her? Do you think she'll still be there?" Congressman Holt called her and handed the phone to Vice President Biden, who then walked off, chatting with Holt (Rush Holt Jr. 2014).

Charismatic Servant Leadership

Holt was a self-proclaimed "servant-leader," a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970. "The servant-leader is servant first. ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (Greenleaf 1991). She first heard the term "servant-leader" during the inaugural address given by then-president of Stephens College, Patsy Sampson (Holt 2013c). As a board member of Stephens College, Holt listened intently to the speech, and the concept of servant leadership resonated with her. "I always believed in servant leadership. You have to be a servant before you can be a leader and you have to be willing to serve to be a leader" (Holt 2013a, 2013b).

Russell and Stone (2002) developed a model of servant leadership based on a composite of existing literature in which they list functional attributes and accompanying attributes. The functional attributes, in order of importance, are vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment. Accompanying attributes are communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and designation. Throughout her career, Holt exemplified both perspectives of the servant leadership model through the work that she did, the way in which she went about getting it done, and in cultivating relationships with those with whom she worked along the way.

Although Holt self-identifies as a servant-leader, the authors and others also note that she is very charming in her approach. Robert House first proposed a theory of charismatic leadership in 1976 (Northouse 2013). Known to act in ways that have a unique effect on followers, charismatic leaders use their personalities to accomplish change. House goes on to list characteristics of this type of leader that mirror those used by Holt including the "desire to influence, self-confidence, strong moral values" (Northouse 2013, 188).

Holt may identify herself as a servant-leader, but it is abundantly clear that she used the gift of her charming personality, in addition to her keen intellect, to accomplish goals.

Commitment to Getting the Job Done

From Holt we get a more intimate understanding of why she was so successful in her career and remembered so fondly by everyone with whom she came in contact. Holt worked hard at every job that came her way. She understood her contribution as figuring out how to get the job done, and she had a heartfelt desire to make the work better. She also had a rock-solid faith and was willing to go wherever God wanted her to go. "I never looked for a job. ... I always felt the Lord put me in a position, and once he put me in a position he would help me" (Holt 2013a, 2013b).

In reflecting on women's roles in executive offices, Holt noted,

Women can do anything men can ... I think in some ways women are better executives. Just like anybody can do a job if he works at it and tries to learn—because I learned by doing—there's no reason why a woman can't do it just as well as a man.

I always felt the business and professional women's organization was a spot for women to grow. That was the point of it. And then the executive women in government—of course it was to get more women into higher places in government ... when women tried to push real hard then men were against it. And I never thought that was the way to do it anyway. (Holt 2013b)

Current West Virginia secretary of state Natalie Tennant has kept the memory of Helen Holt alive by interviewing her and recording their sessions together. Tennant has made the videos accessible on her website. When Holt was 96 years old, Tennant interviewed the former official for posterity. Of Holt, she said, "As a public servant, she had vision for our state. She has enriched me as secretary of state and I am a better public servant because of her" (Tennant 2014).

In awe of her "humble brilliance," Tennant remarked on how impressed she was by Holt. "If she had this impact on me when she was 96, I can't imagine the impact she had when she was 45. ... Even at 100 plus years of age, Helen is still an impressive political thinker. ... she is still offering advice on press releases and political issues" (Tennant 2014).

Although Holt never saw herself as a trailblazer, leader, or mentor when she was holding high-level government positions, she has become exactly those things to women leaders such as Secretary Tennant. Working in the public sector for 28 years at both the state and federal levels, she "never thought about breaking the glass ceiling" (Holt 2013a, 2013b). However, nearly 60 years after her first official public service post, she is more relevant as a role model today than she was then. Theories on gender roles and how they related to leadership were not conceived of in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Because we are now living in an era when the topic of women and leadership is being researched, we recognize how terribly difficult it must have been to accomplish what she did at the time. "I never thought of myself as a trailblazer. It's only until recently I began to

look at what I did in that way” (Holt 2013a, 2013b). She truly is a living legend.

Holt’s remarkable career began innocently enough when she agreed to fill the remainder of her husband’s term in the state legislature. Her continued public service in state government, as an executive officer and then director of the Commission for Public Institutions, paved the way for her remarkable career in federal service as a presidential appointee under seven presidents. For those who have benefited from a nursing home experience they have Helen Holt to thank for creation and implementation of the design, regulation, and financing of the extensive national program that continues to serve the nation’s elderly. Prior to her involvement, suitable housing for the elderly and disabled was not readily available, and government support and regulation were nonexistent. In 2013, as Holt was about to celebrate her one-hundredth birthday, she was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from West Virginia University for her extraordinary service and distinguished leadership to both the state and the nation.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Mrs. Holt for generously sharing her life with us. The authors, both West Virginia University professors, independently interviewed Mrs. Holt. Joined together by their shared interest in this amazing woman, the researchers set out to document the life of the first female statewide office holder in West Virginia. Holt reflected on her interesting and illustrious career. Documents and photographs from public records and national and state archives, as well as comments from friends and colleagues, supplement her reflections to paint a portrait of this astounding story of a woman with profound faith and dedication to public service. As a fitting tribute to this woman who worked tirelessly on behalf of the aging population in the United States, there are many who believe that the program she established, the Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly program, should be renamed the Helen F. Holt Supportive Housing for the Elderly program.

In addition, we are grateful to Congressman Rush Holt, Jr., and to the House and Senate historians who compiled copies of congressional documents containing testimony by Mrs. Holt and notations of her activities. Finally, we thank Dr. John Cuthbert, director of the West Virginia and Regional History Center at West Virginia University Library, and his staff, for their generous gifts of time, resources, and historical documents to support our efforts in writing this article.

Notes

1. “Leave It to Beaver [1957–1964] portrayed the iconic postwar American family: June the perfect housewife, Ward the dad, big brother Wally, and of course Theodore (“The Beaver”), the good-hearted kid whose adventures propelled the show” (<http://www.tv.com/shows/leave-it-to-beaver/>).
2. Betty Ireland was elected to the office of secretary of state in 2004, although in 1988, the first woman elected to statewide office as a state supreme court justice, Margaret Workman, was not in the executive branch.
3. Rush Holt, Jr., first emulated his mother by pursuing a degree in the sciences and later by teaching college and directing a physics lab at Princeton University. His interest in politics was clearly inspired by both of his parents.
4. “The Gridley residents were urged by Mayor Froehlich to observe Flag week from June 8–14 by displaying or flying the flag of the United States all week long. He was quoted in his proclamation saying, I urge the people of the city of Gridley to display the Stars and Stripes at their homes and places of business

and to hold patriotic ceremonies as a public expression of our love of country” (<http://www.villageofgridley.com/HistoryofGridley.html>).

5. According to *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, compiled by the U.S. Department of Education in 1993, in 1940, women with four or more years of college made up only 3.9 percent of the nation’s population.
6. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* was a film about a young, newly elected U.S. senator combating political corruption in Washington, D.C., starring Jimmy Stewart.
7. The West Virginia and Regional History Center at the West Virginia University Library maintains a comprehensive collection of Delegate Holt’s correspondence, news clippings, awards, and announcements. They cover her time in the House of Delegates and as secretary of state in West Virginia, as well as her time and travels as presidential appointee to the FHA and HUD.
8. “From 1917 until World War II, 46 percent of the women in Congress succeeded their deceased husbands ... The pattern continued and even by 1965 and the advent of the women’s movement, almost 45 percent of all female House members had been congressional widows. In the early days ... widows who succeeded their husbands were seen as “place holders,” keeping the deceased’s seat warm until the party could wrangle up a “real” candidate” (Rosenthal 1998, quoted in Andrade 2007).
9. West Virginia’s Board of Public Works “consisted of seven elected executive officials: the governor, secretary of state, auditor, treasurer, attorney general, commissioner of agriculture, and state superintendent of schools. Ratification of a constitutional amendment in 1958 made the superintendent of schools an appointee of the West Virginia Board of Education, but he remains a member of the Board of Public Works. Before 1968, the board enjoyed wide-ranging powers, which increased through the years. The board’s most potent authority was control of the state’s finances, including the areas of budgeting, expenditures, custody of public funds, assessment, taxation, and accounting. Having vast discretionary power, its approval was required for many steps in the administrative process. The system made it almost impossible to know whom to hold accountable for executive actions, particularly in budget and fiscal management. The governor’s power was limited, as one member among seven and having no particular power over the budget” (West Virginia Encyclopedia, <http://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1943>).

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