



Blissful LEADERSHIP

by Bri Kilroy • photography by Two Eagles Marcus

Name: Rosalynn Bliss

Age: 40

Favorite Snack: Skinny Pop popcorn

Residence: Grand Rapids

Education: Bachelor's in psychology and Criminal Justice at University of Southern Alabama and Master of Social Work at Michigan State University

Home Base: Sault St. Marie, Michigan

Family: Six brothers, three sisters and a beagle mix named Cooper

High School Job: Taco Bell

Current Job: Director of Residential Services at St. John's Home

Future Job: 59th Mayor of GR

The last few months have been busy with campaigns as the mayoral elections approached. Rosalynn Bliss finished strong by spending the day before the elections, which was also her 40th birthday, walking door-to-door talking to people.

The work paid off when on August 4, the Grand Rapids community declared Bliss as our 59th mayor-elect, making her the first woman to hold that position. Having won the election the day after her birthday, I asked what she did to celebrate. "I slept!" she laughed.

Genuine and full of friendly energy, you wouldn't believe this woman just got done running a time-consuming campaign while working at DA Blodgett-St. John's full-time. There, she oversees three programs: Kids First, S.T.E.P., and an open residential program called St. John's Home. "My whole family works hard," Bliss said. "My dad is probably the hardest worker I know, so I think strong work ethic is part of my family and who I am."

A conversation with Bliss revealed her diligence as she described her journey to politics. For example, she discussed growing up in her helpful hometown in the Upper Peninsula, her internships that focused on

working in the area of violence against women and children, and her three terms as Second Ward City Commissioner. Read on for a closer look at the woman behind the campaign.

If you weren't mayor or working at St. John's, what would you be doing?

Rosalynn Bliss: I would probably be working in a nursery. I love planting trees and being outside. I'd either be at a nursery or working at a children's camp.

What drove you to focus on social work?

I had an internship at a juvenile boot camp in Mobile. I was placed with teenagers who had gotten in trouble with the law and learned pretty quickly that I wanted to work with kids. There was a lot of good work that needed to be done to help kids heal.

What do you do to further your learning?

I'm a pretty avid reader, so I read a lot.

...Last book you read?

I read multiple books at once. I've always done that. I'm currently reading *Winter of the Wolf Moon* by Steve Hamilton. He's an author who writes murder mysteries and they're all set in the Upper Peninsula. I like the stories because he uses the setting of the

Upper Peninsula and landmarks that I know. Then, I'm reading heavier books that take more time like *A City Within a City* by Todd Robinson. I'm also in the middle of reading the GR Forward plan, which is a few hundred pages long.

What's the goal of the GR Forward plan?

There are a lot of goals (*laughs*). The GR Forward Plan includes restoring the river, redeveloping the river's edges, increasing connectivity of trails, goals around creating housing near downtown, improving mobility and access to public transit. There are goals around education and Grand Rapids Public Schools, who will be opening the new museum school downtown soon.

Are you for or against restoring the rapids?

I support that. It would include removing some or all of the dams and then putting back boulders and trying to recreate what the river looked like before.

What [other] projects are you excited about?

There's a lot we're doing around strengthening neighborhoods. We're looking at creating a neighborhood matching fund, hiring a neighborhood coordinator, working with some of the neighborhood business districts and making sure small businesses are supported by the city.

What inspired you to go into politics?

In high school, I was part of a government class and we had to take the Michigan Civil Service exam. Those who scored highest were paired with someone to shadow, so I was paired with our State Representative at the time, Pat Gagliardi, and it was really the first time I was introduced to public service. I volunteered for his campaign and then went off to college.

I also volunteered on Debbie Stabenow's campaign [when I was getting my MSW] and, through my work in child welfare, I started becoming really active on a number of community initiatives ... I helped plan a march to raise awareness around violence against women and helped plan events surrounding International Women's Day, and through that I got to know a lot of active women in Grand Rapids.

What drove you to run for mayor?

One woman that I had met, Karen Henry, had an informal gathering that she called "Whine and Wine." We'd get together, drink wine and whine about issues, but it was pretty focused on relevant issues at the time. It was Karen and a number of women I met through her that came to me and said, "We think you should run for office." I was like, "What!?"

What made you decide to do it?

I thought about it, I talked to other friends of mine and did some soul-searching. I realized there are a number of critical issues I care about.

What was an issue that stood out?

At the time, the city was just beginning to face its economic downturn and one of the first things they were cutting were the parks and closing swimming pools in the city for kids. That's unacceptable. Once I was elected in '06 [as City Commissioner], that was one of the first issues I tackled.

What are some of the difficulties women in politics face?

Women have a hard time getting elected. Look at the number of women in public office, both at the national and state level, and we're still only roughly 20 percent.

What challenges have you faced personally?

In general, I had a really positive experience campaigning. I did a lot of knocking on people's doors,

talking to them, answering questions. I fundamentally believe that you win campaigns by talking with people and developing a relationship with them.

What were some discouraging situations?

It's stressful to run a campaign. Very time consuming. I had four debates and any time you're in front of hundreds of people and you don't know what questions are going to be asked, it is a little anxiety provoking.

Where do you find your strength?

I get a lot of support and strength from the people I love. My friends and family are amazing. My faith—I think I have a lot of internal strength. When you face tough times, I think it's natural to look back on other obstacles you've overcome and I think to yourself,

"I've had enough challenges in my life that I can draw on and I look to the strength I've found in the past to help me through the future."



Life is a journey; there are ups and downs. You should savor them both."

Are there particular challenges you draw back to?

In general, growing up in a family that was poor. When I was little, I had some pretty significant medical struggles, so I think back to that. Going to college, living alone and putting yourself through college, working two jobs. You get through hard times.

What kind of medical struggles did you have?

When I was growing up, I had a bone disease I was born with. I was in a wheelchair a lot. I've had over 20 surgeries, and now have metal rods in my legs.

Does it bother you now?

I see a doctor every month, but I'm in a much better place medically than I've ever been. I am grateful each day for my health.

What does a successful term as mayor look like to you?

I think a successful term would be one where we've been able to effectively implement some of our goals that have come out in planning and visioning process as a community. As mayor, your job is to take the vision and the plan that our community collectively came up with and implement it.

What are your plans to improve community engagement?

Develop a digital city hall. There are a lot of cities that have done a better job with it where you can find

things easily at your fingertips and give feedback electronically. We haven't really taken advantage of social media, electronic or open data, so there's a lot we can do to truly be a digital city and have a digital city hall.

What do you love about our community?

The people are amazing here! They're generous, committed, and passionate. There are a lot of people who give to our community to make it a better place.

What do you want to inspire the community to do?

I hope I inspire people to get more involved. Grand Rapids is a place where, if you want to be part of something like a project or a change, there's a way to make that happen.

What fuels your Michigan/GR pride?

I love experiences in GR! I love going to Movies in the

Park or Frederik Meijer Gardens to see a show, going to the museum, swing dancing at Rosa Parks—I love the experiences. I think that's what life is about.

Do you have a favorite wine or beer?

Probably my favorite beer is the Peanut Butter Porter at the B.O.B.

How does it feel to have a Grand Rapids Brewing Co. beer named after you?

I think it's pretty cool. I never thought I'd have a beer named after me.

What advice would you give your 15-year-old self now?

I'd try to give myself a little perspective: Life is a journey; there are ups and downs. You should savor them both.

And, just for fun, what's the strangest thing you have in your purse?

I'm an essentials only person, but I do have a little notepad because people stop me all the time and tell me complaints. I have to write them down or I will forget them.

Bliss will continue to serve as Second Ward City Commissioner and work at St. John's, but she's taking the time before she's sworn in to plan. Raise a glass (maybe a pint of the Rosalynn Bliss Blonde) to our new mayor, Rosalynn Bliss, and cheers to you, Grand Rapids, for making it happen.