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Lioness Living in a Bear's Den

A boisterous laugh echoes from the expanse of her mid-size office into the 2nd floor space littered with half empty cubicles. The same office space Kay Barnhill (KB) first arrived for a clerk job with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in the summer of 1973. Fresh out of college, newlywed, and expecting her first child, she still affectionately reflects on one of the most nervous days she has experienced at OPM over the span of nearly 40 years to her employees.

Her confidence and comfort visible in the effortless way she casts solutions and guidance to agency directors, as well as, the highest-level officials of state government who rely heavily on the vast range of institutional knowledge she possesses and provides statewide to keep the state employment machine running smoothly.

“I love it. Yeah, I think if you request that position a grade lower legislature will be less inclined to ask a lot of questions and push it through.” She replies to the director sitting on the other side of their semi-private conference call.

Her position now a far cry from the miniscule role she played those formative years in the organizational management sector of state government. A time when men dominated the top-tier of management, smoke lingered in the office air alongside ashtray littered desks, and women rarely promoted past clerical or secretarial positions.

Like many women from her generation who strived to transcend and breakdown the patriarchal barriers holding them hostage to stereotypical roles, KB worked her way to the top one promotion at a time within OPM. She continued to overcome the restrictions placed upon the roles of women in the workplace, and made her own historical mark on behalf of a movement seeking to evolve into a post-modern perception of society's attitudes towards gender and advancement.

Her dedication to the job and a growing foundation of policies and practices kept

managers and administrations relying so profoundly on her skill that in her last pregnancy her water broke during a critical legislative session. She finished the meeting, then gathered her things and calmly made her way to the hospital to deliver her fourth, and final child.

Slowly, KB made her way from supervisor, to manager, to deputy administrator, even waiting and watching as the OPM Administrator role she was promised went to someone else. It wasn't long before her savvy networking and political prowess finally awarded her the role she was destined for. Since that time, KB has amassed a fortress of strong, intelligent women at her side as deputy administrators, managers, and influenced many agencies to follow suit. A world once dominated by men in power-positions has seen its day as more and more women take the reins.

Throughout her tenure, she has worked for and witnessed male administrators and managers come and go each time the executive administration changed, still she has remained steadfast and strong in her position. Her legacy can be seen in virtually any area her job takes her. Whether it be in the eager faces of the young, female analysts sitting at the same desk she once did, or the weathered, wise faces of those she has worked alongside; both men and women, young and tenured, hold deep admiration for the 40 years of service she has provided to a vast range of state employees, and the major shifts she's influenced for women in the workplace.