

Leila Kiernan's Glass Ceiling

The "glass ceiling" wasn't a term in use when Leila Kiernan encountered it, but it certainly was a factor in her long career in Brighton town government.

Leila Kiernan lived her whole life in the same house on Elmwood Avenue near the Twelve Corners. She attended her Catholic parish school, Blessed Sacrament on Oxford Street, then obtained secretarial training at Nazareth Academy. Leila's father, Timothy Kiernan, immigrated to the U.S. from Ireland in 1887. Four years later he married a Brighton woman, Anna Keeler, whose parents had also come from Ireland. Anna's father, Bartholomew Keeler, worked at the brickyards on Monroe Avenue. Timothy Kiernan is described as furniture finisher and, with his sons, did work for the town of Brighton when it moved into its first town hall at 1795 Monroe Avenue (now Malek's) in 1928.

After high school, Leila went to work as a stenographer at the town hall, an easy walk from her house, and was apparently a valued employee for, at the end of his first year as Brighton Town Clerk, George E. Gordon composed a memo for the 1932 town meeting minutes, saying "Leila K. Kiernan, my deputy clerk, deserves high tribute. She worked with me, beginning in 1932, and between us the records and systems of operating this office are now business-like and efficient, and of service to the people of the town of Brighton whom we serve." Leila continued to serve as Gordon's chief aide through the 1950s, in the office and at public events. Too ill to address the audience at the League of Women Voters Candidates' Night in 1959, Gordon asked Leila Kiernan to speak for him.

Due to ill health, George E. Gordon resigned his position as town clerk on 1 April 1961. Leila Kiernan was given the powers of town clerk but not the title. Seeking the position herself, she was dismayed in May 1961 when the Republican town committee designated Lawrence Mooney as its candidate for town clerk in the fall election. The committee said that they were concerned about Miss Kiernan's vote-getting ability as she had never run for elective office (neither had Lawrence Mooney but he was a well-known figure as manager of the Twelve Corners Wegmans store).

Leila had few options as a Republican in Republican-dominated Brighton. She resigned her position, effective 30 June 1961, and did not dismiss reports that she might run for the office as a Democrat or Independent, saying "I am not a politician and I would not run with just the idea of being elected. It's good government the people want and I feel they should have it." (Rochester Democrat & Chronicle 17 June 1961)

The Brighton Citizens' Republican Committee, a splinter group, presented three candidates for town office, Leila Kiernan for town clerk, and Dean W. Astles and C. Arthur Grainger for the town board. The Citizens' Committee also cross-endorsed the Democrat's choice for town supervisor, attorney Erwin N. Witt, and the Republican candidate for justice of the peace, John J. Darcy.

Just before election day in November 1961, George E. Gordon announced his support for the traditional slate of Republican candidates in Brighton and Monroe County. He did not endorse Leila Kiernan.

The final vote on November 7 was 7,143 votes for Mooney, 5,988 for Kiernan, a strong showing for a third-party candidate but nonetheless, a defeat.

Leila Kiernan went on to work for the Brighton Chamber of Commerce and remained in the Elmwood Avenue house with her brother, Bartholomew, and his family. She died on 8 November 1971 at the age of 69.

As we celebrate Women's History Month in March, it seems fitting to recognize Leila K. Kiernan and speculate that she might have won the town clerk's position a generation later.

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1 February 2024