

McRobert lays bare her 'soap opera life'

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Michael Lloyd/The Oregonian

Former Gresham Mayor Gussie McRobert wants her self-published memoir -- in which she lays out the battles of her lifetime, both domestic and political -- to help people acknowledge abuse but keep them from defining themselves as victims.

When Gussie McRobert was campaigning in 1988, she told Gresham her story: that of a hard-charging country girl who played on her high school football team and wouldn't back down from a fight. In 10 years as the city's powerful and sometimes polarizing mayor, she dominated east Multnomah County politics and forced regional agencies to treat Gresham with respect.

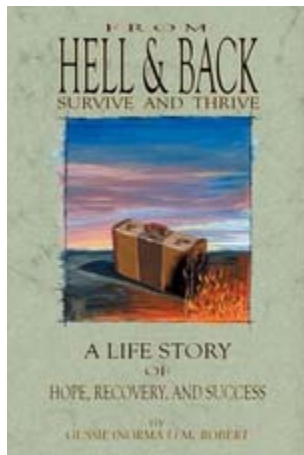
Ten years after she left office to care for her dying husband, McRobert's self-published memoir, "From Hell and Back: Survive and Thrive," balances those political victories with new details about what she calls her "soap opera life," from a childhood that "was like being in hell without flames" to an adult struggle to escape the baggage of her past.

The background gives additional context to professional and political episodes in which McRobert flattened those who stood in her way — as a nurse, a radio reporter, on the City Council and later on the Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission.

Some complained that her approach was too bitter and personal, and several parts of the book revisit angry conflicts with everyone from city staff "technocrats" to Gov. Ted Kulongoski.

But she believes local leaders were simply unprepared for a confident woman who took control rather than conforming or acting as a political rubber stamp. Former City Manager Wally Douthwaite, who resigned a little more than a year after she took office, later complained to The Oregonian that her fellow city councilors "weren't willing to bring her to heel."

Images of her early life — some recovered during years of therapy — are seared in her memory: an angry, resentful mother beating her with everything from freshly picked carrots to a stick of firewood; a loving but alcoholic father who left her freezing and alone in his truck at age 5 the night he was arrested in a bar brawl.



McRobert, now 75, says her confidence sprang from her country upbringing, nurturing teachers, and the love and protection offered by her older siblings. They would stay home from school when McRobert was an infant to stop their mother's attempts to harm her, according to McRobert's account.

Ultimately, she deals with her parents sympathetically, tracing their problems to their own dysfunctional families and an era in which women had little control of their lives.

The cover art is a painting of a suitcase being devoured by fire — McRobert's visual metaphor for torching the past.

"People get it," she says. "If you've gone through a life like I had, people get it."

In a recent interview, McRobert talks about the forces that shaped her life. Comments have been edited for clarity and brevity.

You were really frank in writing this book.

There's no point in doing it if you won't (be frank). I wouldn't write the book if I wouldn't really be truthful about it. That's not me.

Why write it now?

I was supposed to die in 2004. I was getting weaker and thinner. I was losing a pound a day no matter what I ate. I called my internist for the end-of-life medication and he said, "Let's get a third opinion." (After surgery to remove a tumor that was destroying part of her pancreas) I decided I needed to write it down to put it in perspective.

What's the message?

The message is, refuse to be a victim. You can be victimized, but you can choose not to be a victim. That's controversial.

It is?

To a certain degree. (One local 12-step group) isn't happy with me. ... They think you won't ever get over it. They took me off their list.

I get tired of hearing that same thing over and over. Not everybody is going to choose to be a victim. You need to be honest that you're making it a career.

Of course, I had help. I had the ability to pay for counseling.

What was your writing process like?

It was my life. It consumed me. I worked from morning until 11 or 12 at night. I rewrote and rewrote and

rewrote. My cats liked it, because I was always in the office.

Did your mother ever admit trying to kill you?

She never admitted it, and I never brought it up. ... She hated me. That was obvious every day of her life, until she went to work (outside the home). My high school saved me. It literally saved me.

The players have changed, but it seems as though Gresham still struggles to attract more employment and attention and other things you were fighting for 20 years ago.

You don't always get your way. But you persevere. You make your case.

Any regrets?

The only thing I wish I'd done differently was TriMet (which she believed was trying to reallocate federal money earmarked for Gresham projects). I let (the then-head of TriMet) baffle me for too long. But we got our money. We got our check.

Do you ever get into city politics now?

Nope. Honestly, when I'm done with something, I'm done. ... The only thing I do is report things I see happening.

What's next?

I'm working with (a publicist for the book). In an economy like this, the abuse rate is going to go up. This doesn't just apply in a little town. It applies everywhere. This played out in real life by refusing to be a victim.

--Catherine Trevison; ctrevison@news.oregonian.com

Her book

- Title: "From Hell and Back: Survive and Thrive"
- Author: Gussie McRobert
- Information: www.fromhellandbacksurviveandthrive.com/

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