

Mayor on the spot

She got into politics to preserve historic Canandaigua. Now, Ellen Polimeni's larger vision is coming into focus.

by Suzette Norris

About five years ago, Canandaigua Mayor Ellen Polimeni caught wind of New York Sen. Hillary Clinton's plans to visit western New York. The itinerary did not include a stop in Canandaigua, but Polimeni decided to request a meeting anyway—just a short one, maybe over coffee.

"I suggested we meet at the shop on south Main Street," Polimeni recalled recently. "I waited there for a few minutes and next thing you know she walked in. You should have seen the faces of the ladies behind the register."

The encounter was brief, but long enough for the mayor to offer her view on a federal government proposal that at the time threatened to close the Veterans Affairs hospital here. "She and Senator Schumer both helped us a lot with the VA issue," Polimeni said. "I was very appreciative that she took time out of her schedule to make the stop."

The meeting with Clinton never made headlines. And it was hardly an instant fix to a complex, political situation. But it got the ball rolling—which, according to Polimeni friends and colleagues, is one of the mayor's specialties.

"There is a lot more to Ellen than people know because she isn't one to get out front and take credit," said Bill Bridgeo, who served as Canandaigua City Manager from 1987-1998. "She would gladly remain in the background as long as the end result benefits her community."

The ability to quietly harness influential ideas and friends is undeniably an aspect of her personality that has contributed to her dual success in politics (she is in her 17th year as Canandaigua's mayor) and in education (she first joined the Canandaigua School District as a teacher 45 years ago, has served as middle school principal and currently directs the district's education enrichment program).

But the essence of Polimeni, according to those who know her, stretches beyond a sharp intellect and a knack for humility. In today's culture, where people seem to have less

patience for process, Polimeni stands out as one who relishes the mundane—the simple, quiet art of getting things done.

A vision to buy into

Today, community leaders again find themselves navigating a city that is taking a hard look at its past in an effort to determine its future. The most recent impetus was last November's unveiling of an ambitious proposal for remaking the north shore of Canandaigua Lake. The proposal, in which developers announced plans for a \$140-million residential and commercial complex, has stirred up both public and private discussions about balance—between attracting commerce and assuring quality of life.

The mayor, for one, has already worked out her long-term vision of that ideal balance: “In 20 years I would like Canandaigua to be a vibrant lakeside community which has preserved its heritage and maintained active commercial areas as well as adequate housing for all socio-economic groups,” she said.

Just a few years after becoming mayor, she began laying the groundwork. Recognizing the lakefront area as an asset, the city turned its attention to Kershaw Park way back in the mid-1990s.

The park eventually underwent a \$4-million facelift, which now looks to be another example of how the mayor gets the ball rolling. Consider this description of the long-term goal of the Kershaw Park investment, clearly spelled out on the city's Web site: “The undeveloped portions of this business district, zoned retail and office, reflect an outstanding opportunity for the right developers, committed to the vision of the city and the lake.” Certainly it's an inviting welcome for proposals such as the current one brought forth by David Genecco and Richard Crossed (their development's courtyard would essentially blend with the edge of the park just over Lakeshore Drive).

The mayor played a significant role in making sure that vision was something the community as a whole could buy into, said Bridgeo, who now serves as city manager of Augusta, Maine.

“Ellen is pretty unbending in her principles when it comes to open government, fair process and including everyone in the community,” Bridgeo said. “I think that set the tone for how things are done in Canandaigua, and it's led to many of the successes in the community.”

At the same time, as debate unfolds around the most recent lakefront proposal, the mayor appears to be waiting in the wings, a position some say reflects her penchant for political self-preservation.

“Ellen has done a masterful job at not being in the forefront of controversy,” said Assemblyman Brian Kolb, a Republican, who has worked with the mayor, a Democrat,

on a number of issues. “When things are controversial you’ll see a lot more discussion behind the scenes as opposed to the public airing of ideas, and it’s the City Council that tends to be out in front, not the mayor.”

Knowing where Polimeni came from goes a long way in understanding her approach.

A Scrapbook

Polimeni grew up in Poland, N.Y., a tiny village just northeast of Utica that logged only 451 residents in the 2000 Census. Born in 1941, she spent her early years attending class in a one-room schoolhouse and playing on her grandparent’s dairy farm, where her family stayed while her father, Daniel Goggin, was serving in the Navy during World War II.

After the war, her father worked as a boiler operator for the Borden Coffee Company and the family grew. Polimeni was the oldest of 12 children. It was fine training—she developed a savvy for negotiation and resourcefulness.

She excelled in her studies, but Polimeni said she remembers a school counselor advising her not to pursue a college education because of the cost. Unswayed, Polimeni applied to the State University College at Brockport, winning two scholarships. She also took advantage of the National Defense Loan program, which helped offset college loans if she agreed to teach school after receiving her diploma. Her love of education had started long before—back in Poland’s one-room schoolhouse run by teacher Marion Jones.

“Mrs. Jones practiced what they refer to today as ‘integrated learning,’ and I give her all the credit for my success in teaching,” she said. “She is still living. I still check in with her every now and then.”

Polimeni’s ties to her family and upbringing, too, are remarkably current. Her mother Mary, 88, still lives in the family home and the majority of her brothers and sisters live nearby. Her father was known to carry around a scrapbook of his eldest daughter’s accomplishments, keeping it updated until he passed away on Veteran’s Day in 2005.

After graduating from college in 1963, Polimeni moved to Canandaigua where she was offered a teaching job that paid \$4,700 a year. “I remember that summer I got a job working as a waitress in the racetrack’s clubhouse to earn a little extra money,” she recalled. “I made \$5,200 and bought a car.”

Shortly afterwards, she met and later married John F. Polimeni, a native of Canandaigua whose family owned a restaurant on Niagara Street. They have been married for 41 years, raised two children and continue to reside in the house on Wood Street where John grew up.

“Ellen was the oldest of 12 children in a warm and loving family that came out of the Depression years, and she’s never forgotten that,” said 84-year-old Lucy Geise, former school board president and the mayor’s sister-in-law. “When my brother asked me one Christmas what he should get Ellen I remember saying, ‘How about an engagement ring?’”

Although Geise describes the mayor as “apolitical,” Polimeni is a lifelong Democrat—another influence from her past. “My parents believed that any help we got from the government was a result of the policies that the Democratic Party supported,” Polimeni said.

Her husband, who served on the Canandaigua City Council from 1958 to 1962, was active in local politics, but Ellen’s entree into Canandaigua politics grew out of her involvement with a community effort to save the city’s historic Main Street from the urban renewal trend of the late 1960s and 1970s that favored tearing down old buildings and replacing them with modern structures. Her work in historic preservation eventually led to her heading up the city’s planning commission, serving on the city council and also contributed to her successful mayoral bid in 1991.

Over the years she proved to be both a skilled educator and politician. In addition to being a highly regarded teacher, assistant principal and school administrator, Polimeni was instrumental in creating a community/school character-education program that was recognized by New York Lt. Governor Mary O’Donohue as a model for other cities. She was the first woman to chair the Canandaigua City Planning Commission. She has served as president of the New York State Conference of Mayors and in 2004 nearly won a seat in the New York State Assembly, losing to Brian Kolb by 2,800 votes. She also has won numerous honors, including the Canandaigua Area Chamber of Commerce’s annual “Mrs. Canandaigua” award and the Canandaigua Athena award.

Yet a lesser-known trophy, from the Ontario County Fair a couple of years ago, also sits prominently in her Canandaigua Middle School office, and she’s happy to joke about the story behind it.

“I was asked to be in a milking contest,” she explains. No doubt the other contestants weren’t too worried about her, but they should have been. “I won a wonderful trophy with a cow on top that I’m very proud of,” she said. “I haven’t been asked back since.”

But she *has* been asked back as mayor—and repeatedly. Now, 17 years after getting into politics to preserve historic buildings from urban renewal, Polimeni is on the verge of influencing a push to *launch* a major new building project. This, too, could represent another defining moment in her career and for Canandaigua as a whole. How much involvement or even knowledge Polimeni had of the recent proposal for lakeshore development is unclear. One newspaper account late last year claimed the mayor and City Council were “in the dark” about the details.

How much truth there is to that is anyone's guess. A direct question was left unanswered: "If that's what they'd like to think, that's fine by me," was Polimeni's calm, unflustered response.

What really matters, she added, is that the development corresponds to the city's long-term vision. "It's only in the initial phases, but it is what we have been hoping to see for lakeside development, and I'm really feeling good about it," she said. "There's bound to be discussion and negotiation along the way in regard to the particulars, but the concept is what we've been looking for."