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Flower Power

Lucile Belen and the Politics of Integrity

Marcy Murningham

Those who decry the character and quality of our political leadership — usually for good reason — often fail to present us with an alternative, or remind us of those whose public trust has been both well earned and well served. This article does the latter, profiling Lucile Belen, a Midwestern politician who has carried on a legendary family tradition of service that continues to inspire. Her entire life has been lived in democracy's shadow, working to improve her community as a politician, businesswoman, and civic leader. In many respects, it is also the story of the evolution of public service and public life, particularly the role of women. The article chronicles some of the formative experiences in the first half of the twentieth century that forged her brand of leadership. The author argues that, as she stands at the threshold of her tenth decade while continuing to maintain a vigorous civic presence, Belen embodies a tradition of honorable political and civic responsibility that is in peril and desperate need of revitalization and renewal.

If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change.
— Buddha

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk
humbly with your God.
— Micah 6:8

She is now eighty-nine, but when she took the lectern at my father's memorial service on that summer afternoon in 2000, I felt time collapse. There she was, as always: bandbox sharp, trademark hat and corsage, sturdy gait as, shoulders thrown back, she marched to the front of the chapel to pay tribute to Dad, who for more than a decade had been one of her political partners and, like most people in town, a lifelong admirer and friend. During the course of that summer, I had the great honor and privilege of renewing my friendship with her, one of the unex-

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pected — and happy — byproducts of what otherwise had been an extended period of loss and grief.

Her name is Lucile Belen and I adore her. I am not alone. Without question, she is the most respected person in my hometown of Lansing, Michigan, where she served on the City Council for thirty-seven years — five years as its president — and continues to run a thriving, eponymous floral shop founded in 1936 by her parents. She came of age on the eve of the Great Depression, graduating with honors in January 1930, and dreamed of becoming a medical doctor. During her first semester at Michigan State University, taking pre-med courses, her counselor — who happened to be a female doctor, so you would think she would know better — urged Lucile not to pursue a medical career, and even berated her for it. That, along with a need to help support her family, contributed to her eventual decision to change course and, after two years, go to work full time.

Undaunted, one thing leading to another, she was everywhere. In 1993 she left politics after losing, for the first time in thirty-seven years, reelection to the City Council. Was agism a factor in her loss? It is hard to say. “Pick an age you like and stick with it!” is her mantra, she told me on several occasions. (She picked sixty.) Maybe it was just time to go on to other things. She is one of Lansing’s biggest philanthropy boosters (in 1997 she established the Lucile Belen Fund, a donor-advised fund that supports local arts and charitable institutions, with the Capital Region Community Foundation, and served on the foundation’s board for many years) and remains actively engaged in countless community causes. She is often called upon for advice and counsel; most recently, the Board of Education asked her to help revive a bond proposal for the Lansing School District.

In the 1930s, Lucile Belen may have abandoned her dream of becoming a doctor, but she never abandoned her ideals or her sense of civic duty. Face forward, shoulders thrown back, bandbox sharp, she has always marched forward and never looked back. And for the better part of the twentieth century she has dedicated her life to making our world a better place to live and become.

Without intending to, as a politician she has blazed a trail for women in public life — she was born in 1912, eight years before women gained the right to vote — and, in doing so, has embodied the politics of integrity and wise statecraft so cherished in our American civic republican tradition. As a businesswoman she has maintained a practical form of social responsibility, keeping her eye on the bottom line while preserving her position as a trusted public servant. She is a lifelong and enthusiastic Democrat, but because Lansing politics are nonpartisan, Miss Belen’s allegiance was to a greater good, not to the wishes of a Chamber of Commerce or party activists (although she knew how to deal with them, too). Throughout her career, she has maintained an erect posture of common sense and civic virtue that is as old as the American Republic and its antecedents in ancient Greece and Rome.

Miss Belen, as she is known — I simply cannot bring myself to call her by her first name or, God forbid, its common nickname “Lucy.” Believe me when I say this: I may love her, but Lucile Belen is no Lucy — she is a woman who radiates charisma and competence wherever she goes. She enjoys the affection and admiration of legions of Lansingites who, over the generations, have gone their respective ways. And she has earned it. Like George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, one is hard-pressed to imagine the community without her, for she has had a deep and lasting influence on both the character and the culture of local life. Her imprint can

be seen throughout mid-Michigan's political and charitable institutions, its economic development, public schools, community, health, and cultural organizations. It can also be seen — this is what happens when you own a flower shop — in thousands of life's major moments: — births, deaths, weddings, and other big occasions of Lansing area citizens. (Even now, if you call her after hours, she answers with a vigorous "*Belen's!*" — ready to take your order.)

This article introduces her, in a very limited way, to a public starved for political wisdom and integrity. It concentrates on her formative years, the years prior to her first election to the Lansing City Council; it also includes some of the observations of friends and colleagues who have known her for a long time. There is simply not enough room here to convey or do justice to her full story; one can only hope that at some point it gets told, again and again, so that we can be reminded of how good we really can be. At a time of great uncertainty in our never-ending democratic experiment, we need more Miss Belens — and we need to praise them for their contributions, not bury them, because the good that they do lives after them, and graces us all.

Accolades

In late October 2001, Lucile Elizabeth Belen was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame (along with, among eight other notables, Aretha Franklin — but if you ask me, the Queen of Soul has nothing on the Queen of Hearts), the latest in a steady stream of accolades for her leadership and devotion to community needs. "You never achieve anything alone," she told the gathered group, keeping to the three-minute requirement after other inductees had gone on and on. "You have a lot of help. All of the people who are here have helped me achieve what I did." Then, in vintage Belen style, as she told me later, she took the occasion to make some jabs at community Scrooges, which left the audience howling. "Sandy [Draggoo, who introduced her] mentioned that I was a fund-raiser. Well, I have done a lot of fund-raising, so much that people hated to see me come."

I said, one person I went to get money for Lansing Community College — I didn't get any money. I came home with a recipe for blueberry pie. I don't have to worry that the people who are here would recognize themselves, because they wouldn't spend a hundred dollars for a ticket! Everybody laughed . . . They said that I finished it up great, because they had a lot of laughs. And I kept it within the three minutes, without any notes or anything.¹

She is a refreshing antidote for a public grown accustomed to political scandal and scallywags and inured to genuine service and sensibility on the part of those who have won our vote. Indeed, until the terrorists' attacks on September 11, organized politics has seemed more about selfish grandstanding and infighting than it has about the public interest. Some commentators have suggested that the fallout of September 11 will help to restore our trust in government, our faith in public leadership, and our engagement in the political process.

"We can't let it change our quality of life, because that would achieve the purpose of what they did," Miss Belen says when asked to comment on the tragedy. "They were jealous of us, all the way through, of the freedom that we have that they don't have. And if we go ahead and do a lot of restrictive things, then we're going to be doing what they want us to do. . . . We must keep a stiff upper lip, and we must go

forward with our lives, but we've got to be very careful and watch out what happens. Because if we change a lot of the quality of our life, they will be achieving what they want, because they are jealous of what we have."²

If we are to "go forward with our lives," as Miss Belen insists, we must do so as *citizens*, not just as private individuals feeling a burst of momentary patriotic pride. The pre-September 11 cries for better statecraft and "leadership" mask our own culpability. In recent years, as statecraft seemingly has evaporated, we have no one to blame but ourselves: fewer and fewer eligible voters have exercised their franchise, and we end up getting what other people pay for. (The post-9/11 patriotic surge has yet to translate to the local level; Lansing's 16.47 percent voter turnout in the November 2001 municipal elections was the worst it has been in fifty years.) Yet she remains hopeful about the future. "I'm optimistic about the strength of the American people, and the fact that, even in the face of the Depression, the people had strength, you know," she told me last October. "People do have strength. They feel things are going to right themselves. I would say it's going to take six months before people get really back in the full swing of what their lives were before September 11. Of course, it'll never be quite the same, because you'll always be a little alarmed, but you can't let all that keep you down."³

Within this context, Lucile Belen represents a vanishing breed. For decades she has been tireless in her active devotion to democratic principles, often at great personal cost. Rightly understood, her story, and only a partial glimpse is provided here, is the story of the evolution of women's participation in public life. But it is also the story of the *evolution* of public life, as our countrymen and women became more free, more mobile, moving from farms to cities, and then some. But with our freedom came our fragmentation, our disconnection from those simple truths that gave rise to this great nation. Over the past few decades we have turned inward, attaching greater significance to what we can buy rather than what we can build, to consumer taste rather than civic sensibility.

Lucile Belen, God bless her, as she marches on toward her tenth decade, continues to lead and inspire, reminding us of the generosity of spirit that makes us great and good. But before turning to some formative events in her life, let us survey the civic scene as it reportedly stands, so that we can appreciate her even more.

How Healthy the Body Politic? The Civil Society Debate

I strongly suspect that there are many other Lucile Belens throughout America's cities and towns, belying the fears expressed by some commentators, most notably Harvard's Robert Putnam, that we suffer from a "civic deficit" or a decline in "social capital." These "public scolds," as acclaimed author Louis Menand dubs them, believe that, as citizens, we are not connecting with each other and our community institutions very well, a state of affairs that poses grave implications for our democratic future and social and civic vitality.⁴

Although I am persuaded by some of these observations, I also believe that they are rather overstated, and that there are many reasons for hope. One cannot help but be moved by the outpouring of American sentiment, across all racial, ethnic, class, and other demographic categories, that occurred in the wake of the terrorists' attacks. Even Putnam admits that since September 11, "we Americans have surprised

ourselves in our solidarity.” In his answer to the obvious question, Will this new mood last? Putnam is hopeful. Referring to similar sentiments in the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, he predicts that civic engagement will increase, but that it needs government support to do so.⁵

Elsewhere in this issue of the *Journal*, Jeff Coolidge describes the rise of spirit in American public life, and Elizabeth Sherman examines the special contributions of women. Their observations are echoed by other scholars and analysts who have invested much of their professional lives in the causes and consequences of good citizenship.

For example, there is Tufts University’s Brian O’Connell, former longtime director of Independent Sector, a Washington-based alliance of nonprofit organizations. As O’Connell points out in *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, civic engagement begins with the actions of individuals who understand that citizenship carries both rights and responsibilities.⁶ Boston College’s Alan Wolfe, who has studied the role of religion and spirit in American public life, detects an unyielding sense of good will that suggests that we may be better off than we think.⁷

Yet, prior to September 11, there was a robust debate and a growing “civil society” industry rooted in a concern that the body politic was ailing because American civic spirit had died. “If it did,” commented Louis Menand wryly in a December address at Harvard, “then where did all that spirit come from [in the wake of 9/11]? A disease that cures itself this quickly was maybe never a disease.”⁸

The debate over civic participation often is cast on a continuum ranging from individual to systemic causes. One end of the debate concentrates on attitudes, commitments, values, and lifestyle choices; at the other end you have a discussion of structural, institutional, and contextual realities. Robert Putnam appears to reside in the former camp. Generally speaking, his research concludes that television and the mass media are primary culprits for the deterioration of personal ties — and therefore, civic engagement; other causal forces are greater mobility and suburban sprawl, pressures on two-career families, and value shifts from generation to generation. What should we do? Putnam implies that we should turn off our TV sets and spend more time in bridge or bowling leagues; but in addition to these individual actions to restore common values, he also calls for greater governmental and nonprofit leadership in renewing them.

Aligned more with the institutional end of the civil society debate, Brian O’Connell views government and big business not so much as remedies but as part of the problem. Historically, he tells us, the American balance of power has alternated among the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, and the tradition of voluntary associations has served to hold “big government” and “big business” at bay. Civic engagement is not so much threatened by television as it is by an unresponsive government, the widening gap between the haves and have nots, and a system of campaign finance that favors those who vote with their dollars rather than their ballots — or conscience.

Meanwhile, in *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice*, Alan Wolfe chronicles the evolution of the American moral condition from the perspective of Americans themselves. Yet it is not the 1960s, as many liberals and conservatives claim, that should be declared guilty for producing a world wallowing in choice that also erodes the connective tissue of commonly held values and ideals. Rather, it is the sense, emerging throughout a series of structured interviews Wolfe

and his colleagues conducted throughout the country, that society's political leaders and institutions have failed us. Our civic malaise is a pragmatic response to disappointment, dishonesty, infidelity, greed, and the crashing sounds of broken covenants.

So where does this leave us? And what does this have to do with Lucile Belen? There are two answers to these questions.

The first is intuitive, and increasingly supported by experience. The stockpile of social and civic capital may not be as depleted as much as some would have us believe. Indeed, in the aftermath of the terrorists' attacks, I suspect that many of us have come out of our individual caves and recognized that we can do better. Since that awful September morn, Americans from all walks of life have come forward, donating their time, their blood, and their money in solidarity with those who have suffered, and in solidarity with our conception of one nation, under God. You don't have to be at Ground Zero to look for and find community heroes. They surround us.

This leads me to the second answer, which is more institutional and structural and speaks to the way we conduct our elections. If the stockpile of social and civic capital is healthier than we think, its capacity to positively affect political life is profound, as long as we remove the barriers. Lucile Belen is an extraordinary woman, revered in her community, but there are many others like her throughout this great country who are motivated, not by politics or ideology or even mercantile wants, but by a fundamental, deeply felt sense of human caring and compassion. They may not command headlines or respond to survey researchers or pollsters, but they are there and embody, with all their warts and wounds, the better angels of our nature. God bless them, every one.

But in an era where running for office often causes you to lose your shirt and your reputation (not to mention your soul), few bother — and even fewer bother to vote for those who do. Even worse, as we saw in the Florida recounts, one's vote may not even *be* counted.

Miss Belen, and my father, as well as my grandfather and great-grandfather, were politicians long before it became too costly to become so. Their legitimacy was rooted in a set of beliefs and ideals, and the recognition that they were beholden to the people who put them in office with a ballot vote, not a bank vault. Whether or not you agreed with them, they did their job without viewing it as a career or a lifetime entitlement. Where their personal and political lives did merge, it was in pursuit of a decency and kindness that makes a community a good place to live and *be*, not with an eye toward future lucrative campaign donations, job opportunities, or book contracts. Maybe the problem with our body politic is not so much that we lack morals and values, but that our immune system is down, leaving us vulnerable to the toxic effects of the darker side of human nature and its manifestation in Big Names, Big Money, and Big Companies. The collapse of the stock market, Enron, and Kmart are reminders of how silly this faith in Big Whatever is.

In the midst of this, Lucile Belen is but one of countless community heroes who may not, as she has, have heeded the call to public service, yet are out there, anyway. Even so, my favorite community hero is Miss Belen, and there is only one Miss Belen, for me.

Lucile Belen and the Politics of Integrity

Not too long ago, in addition to her induction into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame, the Lansing City Council passed a resolution declaring Thursday, October 25, 2001, as "Lucile Belen Day." In its resolution, the council referred to Miss Belen's "37 years of continuous, dedicated service," her devotion of "countless hours to the Council's business," her leadership and "fabulous institutional memory" which "helped guide the six Mayors [including my Dad] and numerous fellow Council members [ditto] during her 37 year tenure," and her leadership in "most of this community's innovative programs and public institutions, especially those in health care and intergovernmental services." It went on to praise the fact that "Lucile Belen's public service has always been accomplished in conjunction with the demands of her own business, Belen's Flowers, which has always been a favorite in Greater Lansing," and that her "generous giving of her time and skills as a dynamic stateswoman, as a major force in economic development activities that have created new jobs and opportunities for the region, and as an indomitable spirit whose influence has been felt by three generations all serve as examples of the highest tradition of public service."⁹

"She's straight to the point and she never backs down," remarked one colleague, as reported in a story carried in Lansing's *State Journal*, a widespread view shared by friends and associates. Charlie Creamer, a former City Council colleague, put it this way: "When she believes in something, she'll fight to the end." The Michigan Women's Hall of Fame Awards program description was more succinct: "If you want something done in this city, call Lucile," it claimed, going on to observe that "this has been the refrain of Lansing residents for the last fifty years."

Lucile Belen has been the backbone and bellwether of the Capitol City since she was elected to the City Council in 1957. During her 39 years of continuous service, her forthright manner, courage, and compassion for people have made her a role model for hundreds of Lansing-area men and women. While on the Council, she served as President for five years, chairperson of every standing committee, and a key member of almost every ad-hoc committee. She also participated in many intergovernmental boards, including the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission and the Capital Area Transit Authority. Lucile's governmental accomplishments have advanced the status of women in the local political arena and encouraged younger women to participate in the process.¹⁰

One of her proudest achievements in a very long list was her blockage of a plan cooked up by the Michigan legislature to build a parking lot under the Capitol lawn. Using a combination of orthodox and unorthodox techniques, Belen rallied a group of women — members of local churches — who proceeded to buttonhole legislators and lobby them hard. Taking a cue from Gandhi's playbook and applying her own botanical might, the church ladies threatened to tie themselves to the trees should anyone dare raze a blade. Common sense won out and the trees remain standing, a silent green testimony to her passionate defense that also preserves Lansing's reputation as the "City of Trees."

Flower power. The politics of integrity.

Carol Wood, a current Lansing city councilor, refers to Belen as a role model — "a pioneer for women in government" — and recalls walking by the flower shop on Ionia Street as a young girl.¹¹

I do, too, on my way to elementary school — except then it was on Kalamazoo Street.

Miss Belen is a pioneer, part of a generation of women who moved twentieth-century mountains step by step. She is a link in a long chain of those with a can-do spirit who are dedicated to freedom, fairness, self-determination, and service, a member of a family that gave far more than it ever got. She is also a link to some of the twentieth century's momentous events: the transition of American public life from homogenous rural to pluralist urban form; the quickening pace of science and technology; the gain by women of the right to vote; the unforgiving degradation of the Great Depression; the emergence of activist government; the postwar revival of middle-class life; the growth of industrialization, suburbia, and urban sprawl; the rise of interracial and class tensions; the advent of Vietnam, public protest movements, and widespread mistrust in government; the Watergate era and its demoralizing aftermath.

Yet hers is not only the story of a strong woman or that of a woman who comes from a family of other strong women and men, embodying a kind of dynasty in the best sense of the word. It is not only the story of the evolution of public service in a century beset by extraordinary challenges owing to evolving social mores, explosive developments in technology and science, population shifts, and rampant commercialism. Nor is it just the story of a socially responsible businesswoman who, before the term was invented, was committed to integrating her moral and ethical principles into her private and public life.

Belen's story, rich as it is, is more than the sum of these things.

For her story also is *our story*, the saga of a civic spirit that simply will not be put down by changes in the cultural and political landscape that threaten to cheapen us or drive us apart. It is the story of decency, and of courage and honor and goodness, of voluntarism in its best sense, the stuff on which our democracy depends. It is the story of a civic republican tradition that finds expression in day-to-day actions, in open and honest debate that is lacking in pretense, characterized by an altruistic streak and playful good humor, and utterly dedicated to the principle of self-determination and community well-being.

Endings and Beginnings

On that sad summer afternoon in July 2000, her voice was clear and strong, her words direct and forceful, landing like raindrops — plop, plop, *plop* — on those of us gathered together not just to honor Dad's life but also to honor an ideal, an ideal of statecraft. For Lucile Belen, like Max Murningham and countless others, embodied a politics of decency and service, a politics characterized less by money and fame than by the simple idea that liberty, justice, and dignity shall be served. My dad was a Lansing alderman at the time Belen first ran for office in 1957 — they both topped the ticket that year — and my family's admiration and affection for her remain unabated, even though Mom and Dad have moved on to the politics of the hereafter.

When your parents die, you fumble for connections to make sense of the loss and ease the pain. Before the real grieving begins, you cope with the challenge of immediate arrangements, then the ones having to do with possessions and living space, and then, much later, those having to do with personal meaning and identity. In my

family's case, there was always the blurring of public and private that comes with living in the public eye. Even though Dad had been out of office for thirty years when he died, people *remember* in a town the size of Lansing; he served as mayor in the late 1960s, an era when mayors were heroes and the cities burned with the fires of racial tensions. His death brought an outpouring of sympathy from many who had not been heard from in decades; even old political opponents paid their respects, maybe because political enmity falls quickly when the ravages of disease and age make their appearance.

My brothers, Mark and Pat (especially Pat), and I had the privilege of spending lots of time with Dad in his last years, as the Alzheimer's disease progressed and gradually dissolved his once-vigorous form. In the final days, I sat by his hospital bed, working on a friend's autobiography which, as it turned out, intersected some of the events of Dad's tenure as mayor and Belen's as city councilor. It seemed altogether fitting and proper that, at the end of his days, one of his finest political achievements, bringing federal Model Cities funding to Lansing in 1969, would be recalled in the memoirs of Model Cities' creator, Robert Wood, a brilliant man for whom Max and Patty Murningham's daughter would later work, in a racially charged and deeply divided Boston, in the late 1970s.

So I had a chance to think about who should give the eulogy at Dad's service. It didn't take very long, maybe ten seconds, to decide. We wanted someone who not only knew Dad and Mom and the rest of our family, and could speak to the kind of man he was, but also someone who, by his or her very presence, would elevate us by doing so. We wanted someone who could provide both inspiration and comfort, whose words, wisdom, and experience could help bind the wounds of broken hearts and lift our gaze to a higher plane.

She recalled the time that Mom and Dad, back in junior high school during the pre-war period of Depression-era innocence, came into her floral shop to buy a corsage. My father, she said, knew exactly what he wanted for his Patty: violets and roses. She recalled another time years later when, driving back in a city car — Dad at the wheel — after inspecting parking garages in another town, she, Dad, and two other councilors ran out of gas at an exit ramp. Nonplused, Dad jumped out and headed for a filling station. "It was ridiculous," she said, as the thought of four city officials trickling to a halt brought chuckles throughout the memorial chapel.

What made her presence at such a sad moment in our family's history so extraordinary was not just her ability to recount events that occurred way before my brothers' and my time; nor was it her take-charge warmth and good humor in doing so. She had already been an enormous source of comfort and support to me in the final weeks of my father's life as I parked myself by his hospital bedside and tapped away on a laptop computer she had tracked down for my use. And for decades she had been an anchor, a rock, one of those people who, in a town where most people grew up and stayed together, their parents and children forming generational bookends to their lives, represented a source of decency, integrity, and continuity. What was extraordinary is that a woman I have known all my life had become an icon — and one of those touchstones whose eventual passing seems, well, impossible. At a time when politics has become more entertainment than statecraft, or when a "where's mine?" ethic seems to dominate public discourse, Lucile Belen embodies an honorable tradition of public service in desperate need of a comeback.

So I figured that it was time for her to write her memoirs, and for a broader audience to come to know her and be inspired by her relentless energy, optimism,

humor, and good will. Even though I have lived in the East for thirty years, because of Dad's illness and other family matters I ended up spending a good deal of time in Lansing during that summer. What better time than this, I thought, to capture her story? After Dad's memorial service, throughout that July and August, she and I met numerous times; I tape-recorded and had a friend transcribe our conversations, which covered the span of her very rich life. We continue to communicate frequently through phone calls and notes, each occasion a boost to my soul. It was and remains a remarkable experience that generated a wealth of material beyond the scope of this article to address adequately. In a personal way, however, our summer talks became a healing balm to my own sense of sorrow and helped me come to better terms with who, exactly, I am.

But who is she?

Formative Years: Family Tradition and Aspirations

Lucile Belen was born into the American heartland in Laingsburg, Michigan, on December 28, 1912, two years before the outbreak of World War One and eight years before American women gained the right to vote. (During my research, I accidentally discovered that Lady Bird Johnson, another political grande dame, was born six days earlier, on December 22, 1912.) Lucile's formative years were characterized by traits that would blossom in the future: a deeply rooted friendliness, generosity, and quick wit; a keen interest in public affairs; a high regard for formal education; a compassionate and tolerant heart; an appreciation for diversity and pluralism; a bed-rock sense of duty and public service; an entrepreneurial spirit of innovation and hard work.

Laingsburg is a rural village in Shiawassee County that once served as a busy way station on one of the earliest stagecoach, later railroad, routes across mid-Michigan, between Pontiac and Grand Rapids. (Shiawassee is an Indian word meaning "river that twists about.") Founded in 1836 on a site that was once a Chippewa village, Laingsburg was named after a Scotsman who, by way of New York City and Ann Arbor, came to the area in the 1830s to establish both his residency and medical practice.

Michigan was on the verge of incorporation as a state in 1837 and Laingsburg, like other towns, drew economic sustenance from the thriving lumber and mining industries. But by the 1860s Michigan was rapidly becoming industrialized, and as the population shifted to cities and towns, so too did the visibility of small communities like Laingsburg. They receded into sleepy hamlets, leaving a few charming reminders of earlier times. There is even a park nearby called Sleepy Hollow State Park.

Much of the American Midwest was founded by settlers of German descent, and mid-Michigan was no exception. Lucile Belen's paternal grandparents emigrated from Germany, too, in 1857, and after obtaining a land grant, settled in mid-Michigan in an area named after Germany's Westphalia Province. "They came during that period when the immigration laws were changed a little bit," Miss Belen recalls. "Prior to the time they came, if a father became a citizen, the whole family became a citizen. But then there was a period of a few years in there when that didn't happen, and my grandfather didn't know he wasn't a citizen. He was elected a justice of

the peace in Westphalia Township, and I remember all these legal books he had up on the shelf.

During World War I there was all this anti-German feeling. That was around the time they discovered that my grandfather wasn't a citizen, but he'd been a justice of the peace! My brother and I chuckled when we heard that, because we wondered how many of the people he married were still legally married. He was an illegal justice of the peace!¹²

The Belens were a practical, no-frills clan, right down to naming rights. "My Dad's name was Christopher. Christopher F. The family goes like this: My great-grandfather was Christopher F. Belen. And then my grandfather was Frederick C. Belen. My dad was Christopher F. Belen and my brother was Frederick C. Belen," she says. "My dad was born in Westphalia Township [nearby Laingsburg], and his dad was born near Koblenz, in Germany. They came over in 1857. Bismarck was in charge in Germany, and he almost died in the conscription. My mother's family was born in a little province in Prussia, which is also on the Rhine. Her family's name was Lehman. The pronunciation in German is *Lay-man* and the pronunciation is *Bay-lan*, with two dots over the e.

The Lehmans eventually came to Michigan, but first landed in New York City. That was before Ellis Island. They landed in New York City and the men brought their families with them, and they got on the Erie Canal. Took the Erie Canal down to Detroit. When they got to Detroit the women were left behind and the men went overland on horseback to Ionia, where there was a government station where they distributed land, and they got a land assignment over in Clinton County.

Her maternal grandparents arrived in Michigan in 1841 and, like many newcomers, applied for and received grants from the government land commission. After clearing the woodland, they built log cabins, struggled to farm, and befriended the Chippewas and other indigenous tribes. "There were quite a few German families that came then," she says. "Unfortunately, my grandfather, Joseph Lehman, selected land that was all swampy. The first year that all these families were there, many babies died from illness.

But fortunately my mother's family survived and they lived on the original parcel of land, which my grandfather started with about forty acres and then it increased. My mother was the youngest child, and the first one born in the big house that they built outside of the log cabin. The rest were born in the log cabin.

They had a widow's walk on the top of the house, like they have in New England, for the woman to get up on. She would go up there and look out and see about the Indians, you know. And the Indians would come up to the door and she would feed them. Feeding people has always been a philosophy of ours. If people were hungry, you gave them food.

Because many immigrants lived on farms and continued to speak German, keeping up on the news of the day posed a challenge. In what was perhaps a forecast of the family's involvement with politics and current events, her grandfather functioned much like a local version of Ted Koppel or Peter Jennings. "Back in those days — it would be common today — my grandfather read three newspapers a week," she recalls. "He'd get them in from New York and places like that. The men would get in the horse and buggy and ride maybe a half a day to come and sit on the porch and

talk with my grandfather about some of the things that were going on. He was a farmer, but he cared about current events, and people would ride quite a ways to sit and talk with him on the porch.”

Lucile’s mother, Elizabeth, was born in 1886 and went on to become a Michigan powerhouse in her own right. Trained as a nurse, she helped establish Lansing’s public health system after the influenza epidemic of 1919; was one of the first women to be elected to the Michigan legislature — in 1936, she was elected as a Democrat and served two years; helped to organize the Eleanor Roosevelt League during the height of the Depression; and, for many years, continued to play a behind-the-scenes power broker role in state Democratic politics and eventually her daughter’s campaigns. There are many who would argue that Lucile was following in her mother’s footsteps, but left even bigger prints.

By the turn of the century, “my mother made up her mind that she was going to get an education, and that the only way she could do that was to become a nurse. She had already walked three miles in the summertime to go to school,” Belen recalls. “In the winter, they boarded her down in Westphalia, the town. She went to the parochial school. But after that, when she made up her mind she was going to get an education and go into nurse’s training — I always laughed about this — my dad said to her, ‘Well, when you come back, I’ll be married!’”

But she wasn’t going to stay back and get married. She was going! Well, he waited, because when she came back, they got married in 1909. But this was the interesting thing: The reason us children never learned German was because my mother’s family was strictly German, spoke German and everything. When she went to nurse’s training, she had to read these lessons in English. She mentally transferred them back to German to comprehend them, and then back to English again to report them out. She went to St. Mary’s Hospital training, in Grand Rapids. There would be a lot of Dutch in Grand Rapids, but mostly German, too. It was a difficult situation. You can figure that she was a tough lady.

Given that strong-willed women were not always encouraged to follow their dream, what, Miss Belen is asked, was the reaction of her mother’s parents? Were they supportive of her desire to be a nurse? “They were,” she replies. “They were supportive. My mother always told about when my grandmother would go into Westphalia, to the post office, to send her some money. Everybody — all the people around there would just turn up their nose and say, ‘Well, she should be sending *you* money!’ So they were very supportive of her getting the education.” So ubiquitous among women, these divided loyalties between family and career aspirations, and cultural reaction to them, were to surface again. Later in her life, as Lucile struck out on her own at a particularly difficult time in her family and the nation’s economic condition, she was forced to decide between their needs and her own sense of calling. What emerged was a unique blend of the two.

But in the early 1900s, Lucile’s mother was not the only career-minded woman in the family. Lucile also talks about her aunt, who was a bit older than her mother and “went off to Detroit and got a business training. She worked in Kresge’s or the Woolworth company office. That’s where she met her husband, who was an executive with Woolworth’s.” In a family of all boys, the only two girls had working lives, a departure from prevailing turn-of-the-century norms.

Nowadays, many young women fail to appreciate how much things have changed in the past century with regard to women’s rights. Women could not vote at the time

Belen's mother decided to pursue her education and career, even though groups like the National Women's Suffrage Association were working hard to make it possible for them to do so. My own grandmother, Marie Bertrau Planck, was a recent graduate of the University of Michigan by the time women's suffrage came into being in 1920; but gaining the right to vote was only part of the unfinished struggle for equal rights. My grandmother taught French for a while in the public schools, but was forced to "retire" when she married my grandfather because at that time the school district prohibited married women from teaching.

Lucile Belen, then, was born into both a family and an era awash with fast-moving political, economic, and cultural currents, both domestic and international, that would come to inform her own life and her impact on others in the coming decades.

Similar to our current century change, the early 1900s were characterized by pragmatic progressivism in American public life as well as changes in the assumptions and role women would, could, or should play; worries about the consolidation of industrial wealth and power; various mobilizations for disaster relief and other forms of mutual aid; and a recognition of international duties and obligations. It was an era in which Americans experienced massive migration from farms to cities, when changes in the constitutional system of governance were forged, when boisterous battles for racial, gender, and class justice were waged, and when labor unions were galvanized in pursuit of workers' rights.

Furthermore, it was a time that vaulted U.S. sensibilities onto the world stage, a time when politicians had to function as statesmen as well as deal makers, when they became public servants only after having achieved stature in another line of work. (Confession: Around this time, my great-grandfather, Edgar A. Planck, also of German descent, also from a rural area, served in the 48th Michigan Senate in the class of 1915–1916. He did this while continuing his work as a country doctor down near the Michigan /Indiana border, and later on, his professional education at the University of Michigan. All of Dr. Planck's legislative colleagues were doctors, lawyers, businessmen, or farmers; there was no such thing as a "career" politician — at least in Michigan. Indeed, the field of political science, thanks in part to Woodrow Wilson, was still in its embryonic stage. Citizenship and public service were more homespun, not yet the stuff of advanced degrees or political consultants.)

At the time of Lucile's birth in late 1912, the United States had recently experienced a handful of cultural, political, and economic watersheds: eight months before, in mid-April, the *Titanic* sank in the cold waters of the northern Atlantic after hitting an iceberg; Democratic Party nominee and former Princeton president Woodrow Wilson succeeded in fending off Republican challenger William Howard Taft and Teddy Roosevelt, who ran on the Progressive Party ticket, to win the White House; and New Mexico and Arizona were admitted to the Union as the forty-seventh and forty-eighth states — something not to be seen again until the admission of Alaska and Hawaii in 1959. In business, Frank Woolworth expanded his empire by buying out several dime stores and went on to incorporate as F. F. Woolworth Co.; *Pravda* was launched as the first official publication of the Russian Communist Party; Congress established an eight-hour limit on the workday for federal employees, a departure from the ten- to twelve-hour days Americans were accustomed to working.

Lucile's arrival came in the midst of yet another national debate over taxation and representation, manifested in efforts to ratify the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amend-

ments to the U.S. Constitution. Before Lucile was three months old, in February 1913, the Sixteenth Amendment was approved by three-quarters of the states, thus allowing the U.S. government, for the first time, to levy a graduated personal income tax, at a rate of one percent on taxable net income above \$3,000 for individuals, \$4,000 for married couples, less deductions and exemptions. Besides taxation, the matter of democratic representation also occupied the reformist agenda: Progressives pushed hard for ratification of the Constitution's Seventeenth Amendment, which provided for direct popular election of senators. Until the approval of the amendment in 1913, U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures, a practice increasingly vulnerable to state-level special interests and corruption.

Lucile Belen, then, was born into a world forged by indigenous Americans and immigrants, and further riven by changes in the role of women and the structure and process of government, politics, and business, realms she would later come to dominate in the capital city, Lansing.

"I was born in Laingsburg, Michigan, where my father, Christopher F. Belen, was in partnership with another man in the meat business," she recalled to me in mid-summer 2000 about her parents' short-lived stay in the little village. They were there only six months before returning to Lansing, where they would live out the rest of their lives. "The business wasn't very successful, so one day my mother said to my father that she was going to leave and come back to Lansing. He said, 'Well, I'm going to stay.' As she got on the train with me in her arms, and as the train went through town, he got on, so he decided he was going to go back with the family. So they came to Lansing." For Lucile, it was a coming home, of sorts: "Now there's nothing wrong with Laingsburg," she once told an interviewer, "but I still wish to this day I had been born in Lansing, because I love this town. I never quite forgave my folks for that."¹³

Lucile was the oldest child; her brother, Frederick Christopher Belen, was born the next year, on December 25, 1913. Her sister, Virginia, was born in 1918, around the time of the worldwide influenza pandemic that wiped out the lives of 20 million people, including 400,000 Americans. It was also the period during which America experienced its first round of urban race riots, which broke out in twenty-nine cities after African-American soldiers returning from the European front demanded greater civil rights and were confronted by white mobs. The quest for public health and racial justice would later come to characterize Lucile Belen's political ethic; she and her family were steeped in it throughout the twentieth century.

Frederick would go on to become a distinguished Washington lawyer and, from 1964 to 1969, deputy postmaster general in the Johnson administration; in this capacity he helped the post office establish regional distribution centers and the five-digit ZIP code. Frederick died in 1999, Virginia in 1963.

"My sister was born at the time they had the Student Army Training Corps at MSU — it was Michigan Agricultural College then — and that preceded the ROTC, Reserve Officers Training Corps. All of these young recruits got sick with the flu," Lucile recalls.

They were desperate for nurses then, and they found out somehow that my mother was a trained nurse, and they took her out. They got a babysitter for my sister, which was unusual back in those days. My mother went out and organized and ran the hospital for all these young men who had the flu. Word must have gotten round that she knew how to organize and keep things going, because one day she got a telephone call from the

mayor, whom she didn't know. The mayor of Lansing. And he said, "Mrs. Belen, I understand you are quite adept at this," or whatever he said. "Well, our hospital that was on North Cedar Street needs some organization. I wonder if you'd stop in on your way home and see what we could do." So she stopped in there and sort of helped them. At that same time, she found all these families where everybody was sick. Well, she got the women, whom you would call the Social 400 or whatever, to organize a soup kitchen where people could come and bring a kettle and get soup for their whole family.¹⁴

The city hospital her mother helped to organize is no longer there (it went the way of 1960s urban renewal), but her managerial skills continued to be recognized and tapped. Like mother, like daughter: although she set aside her own desire to become a doctor in order to help her family, years later Lucile would give generously to the cause of public health. For years she served on the health committee of the Ingham County Board of Supervisors, and subsequently on the Ingham County Board of Health. In the early 1960s, she ran the Ingham County Health Department for six months while a search was conducted for a full-time director. For twenty years, she served as a trustee and chairman and major benefactor of Ingham Regional Medical Center, a community-based teaching hospital that evolved from being a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients in the 1940s and 1950s into a first-rate hospital with one of the nation's finest cardiac care and orthopedic units. What is remarkable about these achievements, particularly from the vantage point of a Massachusetts political culture where things never seem to get done, is that concurrent to these roles, she also continued to serve on the Lansing City Council and run a highly successful business, all the while maintaining her dignity and honor.

"People like Lucile are the people that *create* the public policy," commented one admirer. "They're the ones that today's students need to study and emulate, because they plowed new territory. They really did. I cannot think of another woman in Lansing that ever developed the prominence as well as the endearment that Lucile's developed in that city. *Everyone* knows her. Three-quarters of the people call her Lucile. I don't. It's still hard for me to do that."¹⁵ Kennedy School, take note!

So highly regarded is she that the Ingham Regional Medical Center Board of Trustees unanimously decided to name a wing after Lucile Belen, "a legacy that will last at least as long as the hospital she has helped to build." IRMC board chairman Derwood L. Boyd noted, at the dedication, that "the Belen Outpatient Pavilion is our way of saying thank you to Lucile for a lifetime of love on our behalf. Because of her contributions, the respected and revered Belen name will not only be remembered from Laingsburg to Westphalia, it will long be cherished on the south side of Lansing as well."¹⁶

Ed McRee, a well-respected man, longtime head of Ingham Medical Center and one of Belen's closest friends and colleagues — he's known her for forty years — is lavish in his praise of her contributions to the institution, individuals, and the community. "She's a delight, isn't she?" he told me. "I had been at Ingham probably four or five years when Lucile Belen was named to the board. She was named to the board by the Ingham County Board of Supervisors at that time — they're called 'commissioners' today."

I didn't know anything about her. I was a bright thirty-year-old, and one of the board members said to me, "Oh, Ed, I feel sorry for you because she is a *tiger!*" Well, you know, you can interpret that a hundred thousand ways. And I thought, Oh, boy, you know — I wonder what's coming down the pike. So I called her and I asked her if she

would like to come over to the hospital and let me show her around and give her some materials, and tell her something about what we were doing and what we hoped to do. And she said yes. And so she came over. My first impression, as she walked down the hall — she always wears a hat, as you know. She had on this beautiful hat that went just beautifully with her dress, and she came in, and the first thing she did was stick out her hand. In those days, everybody didn't always shake hands, particularly with women. But I thought, you know, there's some verve here. This is really a lady that's out to do something. So we sat and we talked for quite awhile, and she went away.

My impression was that “*tiger*,” probably, but nevertheless a fairly dedicated woman — and I think this is going to be okay. And over the years, it turned out to be not only okay, it turned out to be spectacular. Because she served eventually as chairman of that board for twenty years. And that doesn't happen often, particularly for a woman. I never saw her out of the way with anyone at the board table. She was always the epitome of decorum. She was astute, she knew what was happening, and she knew how to make things happen. And we just developed a very warm friendship that has lasted, I guess it's forty years now. And I just have enormous respect for her.

One of the things — you know, back in the sixties, she was kind of plowing the territory. I think she was the only female on the Board of Commissioners at that time. You know, people really sort of looked askance at women moving into “high places.” And yet, she did that with great aplomb. She just knew how to navigate the territory. She did it just in a spectacular way that has endeared her not only to the City of Lansing but, really, to anyone that's ever dealt with her. . . .

She's a woman with a lot of starch in her back. . . . Part of her political astuteness always made her aware of what was happening in health care. You know, health care became more political with the advent of Medicare and Medicaid and those things in the mid-1960s, and she remained very understanding of the dynamics of what was happening.¹⁷

McCree's sentiments are echoed by many others, including one who could be considered a Belen protégée, someone who also took the reins of a public institution and managed it well. Since January 1985, Lansing's regional transit authority (CATA) has been run by Sandy Draggoo, who came to the executive director's position after years of prior service, and after Lucile Belen helped eradicate lingering doubts that a woman could take on such a job. “She is an independent woman thinker who has forged such a strong path for many of us to take,” Draggoo told me. “I will *forever* be indebted to her. I'll never forget who helped me get somewhere, or who did something for CATA. And Lucile is that, both on an individual basis as well as an organizational basis. She is such a strong supporter, such a special lady.”¹⁸

But in 1918, these tributes and recollections were far off in the future. *Who would have thunk . . . ?*

“When World War One ended, the Metropolitan Insurance Company approached my mother and said, ‘We want to establish a visiting nurse service for our policyholders in this area. We wonder if you'd be interested,’” Miss Belen told me, evoking an earlier incarnation of public service. “So they talked her into doing that. She was a visiting nurse herself, and drove around in a little Model T Ford. She told an interesting story about those days. The day of the Armistice — November 11, 1918 — she went to eleven different homes where everybody was sick and the fire was out. She built eleven furnace fires that day in these homes so the people would be warm.”

Later in the twentieth century, Lucile Belen, like her mother, would achieve renown for her “can-do” spirit of spunky orchestration. But in 1917, for a young

woman in her mid-twenties with three small children at home, such behavior was unusual, to say the least. Where, Miss Belen is asked, did her mother learn all these organizational skills? “I don’t know,” she replies. “Unless it was in her own family. I think she learned some of them in the hospital. I remember her telling the people in the flower shop, when they would go into the refrigerator a half dozen times, ‘Get yourself organized! I couldn’t go in the operating room and run out and get the different equipment! I had to take it all in with me!’”

After the family relocated from Laingsburg to Lansing, Christopher Belen joined Preuss’s meat business in North Lansing. “Dad was always quite outgoing and he made a lot of friends, so they put him in charge of the wholesale section until the store went out of business,” she told me. (The store owner, Frank Preuss, had a son who eventually served on the Lansing City Council alongside Lucile Belen and my father, Max Murningham.) He then relocated, joining another grocery business and managing all the wholesale goods. By 1920, the family had moved to a lovely old Victorian home in the center of the city, not far from where Belen’s Flowers is currently located and where she now lives. The house was built by the same men who had constructed Michigan’s State Capitol.

“I remember this house. It was on Chestnut Street,” she recalls. “It was originally built for the brother of [Oldsmobile founder] R. E. Olds. It had beautiful inlaid parquet floors, particularly in the dining room. In fact, we took dancing lessons, my brother and I, and the dancing teacher came to the house and we took those lessons on the lovely floor. Years later, I met this dancing teacher. In fact, she died about a year ago, and she was a lovely lady. But can you imagine taking a street car to go to different homes to teach dancing? You couldn’t make much money that way!”

Eventually, her parents decided to start a business of their own — a wholesale flower enterprise called the Michigan Floral Company. It was the beginning of a firm that, as management experts now say, is loaded with that valuable intangible called “goodwill.” “There were no wholesalers around here, so my mother and father would get in the van around four or five o’clock in the morning and drive to Grand Rapids to buy plants and things,” she recalls. “And one time she was in this big greenhouse, and every time she passed this worker he turned around quick and looked at her.”

Finally, one time when she was going by and picking up the stuff, he turned around and said, “Are you Mrs. Belen from Lansing?” And she said yes. He said, “Do you remember me? My wife was sick, and you came across this open corn field to get to the house to take care of her and the baby, and while you were there the wind came up and I said to you, ‘You’ll never make it back across that muddy field, but if you’ll get on my back, I’ll carry you back.’” And she got on his back and he walked her back to the car, which was parked on a street. They were putting sewers in all that area. It was all muddy. And she walked through some of those big sewer tiles to get to where she was going. She was really a strong lady. I’ve always remembered that story that she told me, about that man.

Moral Outrage, Justice, and Mercy

By the time the flower business was organized, the family already had a reputation for its good works and extraordinary sensitivity to those less fortunate. Lucile’s mother, by the mid-1930s, had delivered hundreds of babies during a period when

there was no form of organized aid. “I still remember the stories she’d tell around the dinner table about empty cupboards, hungry children, and people in our community who desperately needed help,” she once told an interviewer. “As I grew up, I watched her collect food and clothes for the needy, care for the sick, and console the discouraged. To this very day I can still see her standing by the dining room window, sharing peoples’ problems and their lives. She’d listen intently, and when the time was right, she’d point to the sun setting in the western sky, and say, ‘Look. The sun is still shining. And it’s going to shine tomorrow.’ It was a pet phrase of hers, and it always seemed to help. I guess the reason I do the things I do goes back to those early days. My parents imbued me with the spirit that we should use our God-given talent for the benefit of others. And those of us who are blessed with extra strength should do a little bit more.”¹⁹

As she reflected on these lessons and experiences during several of our conversations, I began to understand the full power and depth of their impact on her, of how they served as the foundation for her budding political consciousness and the well-spring for her moral outrage. “After World War One, there was quite an influx of different nationalities,” she told me, referring to a process of urbanization and industrialization that characterized postwar America in the 1920s. By that time the country had grown to 100 million, with most Americans living in cities, rather than on farms.

A lot of Southerners came up from Tennessee and those areas, too, because auto plants were starting to work, and they were importing a lot of people. This was before the start of the Depression, but my mother knew that there would be some sort of recession. She didn’t know it as a recession, but she knew it was going to be something like a recession, because she was taking care of people who worked six months at the plant and then got laid off. There was nothing for them to do for the next six months until the plant had another impendance of work orders. Then they would call them back.

At first it was three months between production cycles, and when they went back to work, they would gradually catch up on the bills they incurred during the three-month layoff period. But then when it started to be four months, five months, and six months between production, and they were laid off, they never caught up. And my mother, during that period of time, was taking care of a lot of women who had their babies at home. The doctors knew my mother, and they would have her contact these people. She gave them a little prenatal advice, and so on. Many of them were poor.

I remember one family — I think of them often — that had twelve children. The lady was a convert to the Catholic church. They had twelve children, and my mother went to see her before this baby was born. The bed was not whole anymore, it was half down, because the woman was very large. She had a problem as a result of this pregnancy, and my mother just shook her head. First she went to the Catholic church right down the street, where all these kids were going to get some help for this family. She got nothing, so she went to the Baptist church two blocks further, and they came in and they put up curtains and helped get this family something. And the night the baby was born, the lady said, “Oh, if I could only have a piece of toast and a cup of coffee!” My mother went out to the doctor and said that, and then took him to the kitchen. They opened the cupboard, and it was absolutely bare. So he went down the street — there was an all-night bakery down there about the corner of Rumsey and Michigan — and he got a pack of bread for a dollar, and he got coffee someplace, and he came back.²⁰

Can you imagine a doctor doing that in this day and age? I wondered. Who was the doctor? “Larry Drolett,” Belen told me. Why, I exclaimed, Dr. Larry was *my* doctor, too, growing up! He was our family doctor, and he used to make house calls

to us, as well. In fact, the Droletts lived right across the street from my grandparents, and were great friends of our family. I was delighted to hear this story of compassion and kindness and knew that the “younger” Droletts who still live in Lansing would be, too.

But the story of the poor pregnant woman with a dozen children does not end there. It continues, providing a glimpse into what life must have been like growing up in a household that was a public haven for those less fortunate and oftentimes indigent. When you grow up in a setting like that, you are not quite sure where “you” leave off and “other people” begin: you *are* the other people — or at least you develop the capacity to empathize with their situation. When surrounded by adults like this, you watch, you listen, you become attuned to the nuance of nonverbal cues, to the essence of the human condition. As you develop this almost sixth sense, you realize that you bear responsibility for doing something with this knowledge. You become politicized. You don’t even think of it that way — you just are. You have soaked it up, and it becomes a permanent part of who you are. Justice and mercy. And outrage.

At a personal level, you also, quite possibly, make a decision never, ever, to find yourself in similar straits. Perhaps this is a major reason Lucile Belen has always remained a “Miss” and stayed single: it was simply too much to bear, the idea of possibly ending up like that. At least, that is what she says. She continued:

The lady didn’t recover, so my mother went to a club of hers, took those kids, and went out and bought them each an outfit so they could go to their own mother’s funeral. So she was more than a nurse. She was a social worker, really. And I think that’s why I never got married, because these people would come to the house.

Now, I wouldn’t be in the room — I might be someplace else. But I could hear them talk about the tragedies they were having. Maybe when families have a financial problem, the men fight and everything. Or maybe the woman gets beat up or something. They would come tell my mother all these stories. This was the early 1930s, when so much of this happened. They were coming to my mother at that time. There was no organized social relief, and there were not many social workers.

The Depression marked a turning point in Lucile’s life, when informal charity and good works gave way to hardball politics. Her mother’s moral outrage over the absence of adequate social services to deal with the Depression’s devastating effects catapulted her into organized politics and served as the basis for the Belen dynasty in years to come. In 1930s Lansing, there was a city welfare office where you could go to get help, but it was not the kind of place that kept your dignity intact. Miss Belen remembers it as a dreadful place. “This man was so nasty to these people, who were really good people. They came out of that office crying,” she said. “My mother found out how this man got his job, and she decided that he had to get out of that job. He had gotten it through a city councilman who was from the second ward. So my mother decided that the councilman had to go.

We always sat around the table as a family, and my mother said, “He’s just got to go. We’ve got to find out . . .” So she found out when his election was up and everything, and said, “We’ve got to find somebody to run against him.” And my brother Fred, at that time, was working at the schools. We always had a city directory, no matter how poor we were. We were poor like everybody else, only not as poor as the poorest person because my dad earned a little bit of money, and my mother would occasionally get five dollars when she’d deliver a baby — she didn’t really get paid.

And so we fed a lot of people at that time. We lived at the corner, where the flower shop was, of Kalamazoo and Sycamore. People, when they were walking downtown, would accidentally stop in right at noontime, so my father would bring home the very inexpensive cuts of meat — like neck bones — and I like them to this day. My mother would cook a big kettle of neck bones and we would get potatoes and people would give us things that we could give to people. She would cook so that people, if they came by, would get something to eat, because she knew they stopped in because they were hungry. My brother and I used to laugh and we'd say to each other, "We've got to rush to our own table!" Well, anyway, you could buy twelve pounds of smelts for a dollar. We used to get twelve pounds of smelt, and my mother would cook them all. She never would cook them after the Depression. She'd cook the whole twelve pounds, and there it was for all these people who came by our house to eat. I would hear all of them talk about all of their problems and I . . . You know, I was at the formative stage, and in my mind, I wasn't going to get in that kind of a bind!

As any good politician knows, adversity can be the handmaiden of political success — for outsiders, that is, unless you are an incumbent and very, very adept at handling it (something former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani has stunningly displayed). Back in the thirties, it was Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt who helped restore the nation's sense of dignity and honor. They also inspired the Belen family into action, which led to an extended political apprenticeship that helped Lucile achieve such remarkable success twenty-five years later.

Political Awakenings

Lucile Belen was still in her teens and the country was falling apart when her mother decided to get involved in politics. "She read and she read about Franklin Roosevelt," she tells me. "She figured there had got to be a change. There had got to be something to help the situation, so she got busy. She worked as a Democrat for Franklin Roosevelt, not knowing Franklin Roosevelt."

Well, she is asked, if she did not know Franklin Roosevelt, what then was her mother's first toehold into organized politics? "Well, indirectly it was Roosevelt," Miss Belen replies, "but before that, in the late nineteen twenties, she was pushed into it because one day she read in the paper that all these people were supporting so-and-so for mayor, and my mother's name was on the list, in big black letters."

I can still see it. My mother was so upset! Well, of course they knew she was taking care of all these people, and these people knew her. They could see that her name would mean something. But they never asked her, and my mother said, "I never said that." That man got elected, and that was her first input. Meanwhile, she had been a friend of the man he ran against. But after that election, she could see the power.

This was one of the many, many lessons the family would learn and come to master when it came to the art of politics and governing. Endorsements. Patronage. Compromise. Careful attention to people's wants and needs. Minute attention to detail. Listening. Honing your instincts. Most of all, *making sure you've got your votes!* In this era of hired guns and focus groups, one needs to remember that retail politics — the kind where you go door to door, face to face, with a firm handshake and look the person straight in the eye, where you treat each voter as a whole human being, not some demographic within a larger "constituency" or interest group, where you don't have to spend all your time raising millions and end up beholden to those

who gave it to you — is the kind of politics that built this nation and is in desperate need of revival. But let us return to her story.

Her recollection of her first exposure to politics was when she was a young girl. “When I was about twelve years old, there was a man who was connected with the Veterans of Foreign Wars Society. He was working for Wilbur Brucker for governor, and he had petitions for Brucker. He gave my mother a petition. She gave it to me. I went out and got it circulated, and I wasn’t even old enough to vote.”²¹

When the stock market crashed in 1929, Lucile Belen was on the verge of graduating from high school. She received her diploma from Lansing Central in January 1930, the youngest in her class. (In those days, grade levels were divided into two sections, A and B, with half graduating in January and the other half in June.) I wondered what it must have been like, to stand on the threshold of your own future and see the world in chaos around you, about to nosedive into an economic depression — that year alone, 1,300 banks failed and unemployment exceeded 4 million — the likes of which had never been seen before. She says, “In that period, from January 1930 to the following fall, I was home.”

My mother wouldn’t let me go to work because, she said, “You won’t earn enough to buy your stockings.” So I stayed home while she did the work. That fall I started at Michigan State. Somehow my family scraped together the tuition money.

But you know, I’ve always thought this: back in those days, there probably weren’t as many scholarships, but there were some. Now I was the third highest in my class. I had a 96.3 average for the whole high school years, which out of a hundred is pretty high. But the only ones that were getting scholarships I think were the college professors’ kids and the teachers’ kids. They knew about scholarships. My folks didn’t know anything about scholarships. So they scraped the money together, and I started out to MSU.

What then occurred was a defining moment that seems completely out of character, but in the context of those times, comprehensible: *Lucile Belen was persuaded to abandon her goals because she was a woman!* An unthinkable event by today’s standards, but not uncommon for our mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations (at least for those of us who are baby boomers). Seventy-one years later, this memory remains intact, even though she has rarely talked about it.

“I had planned to take a pre-med course,” she says. “This counselor that I was assigned to was a woman doctor, but she was serving as head of the athletic department at MSU. She gave me such a hard time. She said, ‘That’s nothing for a woman to do. It’s such a hard job,’ and so on. She just downgraded me so bad that I changed into another basic course. She was married to a doctor, too, and the doctor she was married to was a very dominant type of man. But you know, I’ve had a good life, so it doesn’t matter.”

Medicine’s loss was our gain as Lucile Belen would go on to minister to the body politic. By 1932, when Roosevelt was elected, the country was sinking even further; the Dow-Jones Industrials sank to a Depression-era low of 41.22. Eleven hundred more banks failed, nearly 20,000 businesses went bankrupt, and 21,000 people committed suicide. Meanwhile, in Michigan, Lucile’s mother got more heavily involved in politics in the years after Roosevelt’s election. “That spring, Murray D. VanWagoner ran for highway commissioner,” Belen recalls, referring to a Detroit Democrat who would eventually serve a short stint as Michigan’s governor in the early 1940s.

My mother worked hard for him, and we had an election night party for the workers. She could throw a nice party even if she didn't have anything. She got out her fine linen, her silver, all that stuff. She served punch, and I remember my dad brought home cold cuts and the table looked lovely. Two days later, I got a phone call. My mother wasn't there, and it was spring break from MSU, and this man called and said, "Do you want a job?" And I said "Sure!" even though I was going to school. I knew that money was important then. Then he said, "Well, if you can be down to this building" — which was the old Bank of Lansing building — "within half an hour, you can have a job." Well, I got my stuff and was running downtown, and I met my mother halfway. She said, "Where are you going?" I said, "If I get down there in half an hour, I'll get a job!" Well, she didn't have a chance to shut me up. I went on anyway, even though she would have said, "Don't go."

I got the job. There was a big room and I saw this man there. Remember, I had not taken business courses in high school. All I had taken was pre-college stuff. You took either the pre-college or the commercial stuff. But I could type, because in junior high school my mother had started me off taking one course, the typing, and that was the only course that I almost failed because I was so competitive. I would hear your carriage go back and I'd wonder, Are you ahead of me or behind me? so I'd make mistakes. My mother wasn't going to have any of her kids not pass, so she rented a typewriter and sat me on it and every club she belonged to, she said, "My daughter can type your minutes!" So I practiced and worked and worked at it, and I got this job.

The year was 1934, and the job was with Michigan's newly formed Liquor Control Department, one of several state agencies across the country formed in the aftermath of Prohibition. The repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in late December 1933 set the stage for states to reassert their authority over liquor legislation, distribution, and sales. This meant the creation of bureaucracies that would monitor taverns and barrooms, hotels and restaurants, and liquor distribution channels with an eye toward protecting the public from the "drunkard-making business." Liquor ads fell under government scrutiny, and taxes were imposed on its consumption. Meanwhile, these new state units became powerful monopolies of their own, dispensing rewards and punishments in the form of lucrative liquor licenses to worthy (or unworthy) applicants.

Lucile's mother had been heavily involved with the movement to do away with Prohibition, "because practically every home that she went to, to take care of people, she could smell that they were making their own beer."²² When Michigan, like other states, held its ratifying convention to pass the Twenty-first Amendment nullifying the Eighteenth, her mother "desperately wanted to go. She worked so hard, but the local delegate gave his two tickets to somebody else." Undaunted, Lucile had a clever approach to the problem: she knew that delegates were coming from all over the state, including the Upper Peninsula, so she rang the hotels where purportedly they were staying and asked if they were using all their tickets. "Well, I ended up with four or five tickets," she says. "My mother went to the balcony of the State Capital and here were the local people, who were just flabbergasted. Here was my mother! I went too, because I got the tickets. And my mother was able to take one or two people. I think about that now. I think that was a lot of nerve for somebody who was in her early twenties, to do something like that."²³

Thus did Lucile Belen, at the age of twenty-two, display a talent that would later come in handy: she would pay attention to details — name by name, block by block, precinct by precinct — and draw upon an infinitely ingenious supply of common sense. Mighty impressive that, in a setting that at times must have resembled a cross

between Charles Dickens and Tammany Hall. Yet, when you think about it, what better place than the state Liquor Commission to inspect the gritty side of human behavior, of deal making and power brokering where the stakes were — no pun intended — pretty high? It was like going to Harvard in the *real* business of politics. Self-taught, she would make a favorable impression on her employers with her vast knowledge of Lansing's people and terrain, her ability to keep accurate records, do high quality work, and, perhaps most important of all, *make other people look good*. This was her training ground for further honing her political skills, as well as her sensitivity to human nature, needs, and behavior. She recalls, "They hired me and I was in this department where the license applications came in, piles and piles of them."

Everybody wanted a liquor license, and I was behind this counter. I have a good memory to this day. My mother made us remember things.

Anyway, Joe Doakes would come up to the counter, and he'd say, "I'm looking for the application for the Niles Elks Club," and I'd remember seeing it. I'd say, "Okay, just a minute," and then I'd go over and find it. In one week alone, I got seventeen pounds of Sanders' chocolates, those fancy chocolates. I shared them with everybody, so that everybody helped me find the stuff, you know. And everybody thought I was really good.

Then they found out that I knew where everything was in Lansing, where every building was, so if they had a message to go from the Liquor Commission in the Bank of Lansing to the State Capitol, they sent me. And I would walk and I'd listen to these political men behind me talking this and that, and I'd go home with all this political gossip.²⁴

The first week, she worked seventy-two hours ("No overtime pay or anything"), and soon was asked if she wanted to fill a clerk's vacancy. The problem was that the job entailed taking dictation. In classic Belen "can-do" tradition, even though she did not know stenography, she developed her own shorthand system that weekend, which did the trick. "I figure now it was really speed writing," she says in retrospect. "Abbreviations. I went to work that Monday morning and thank God he was a slow dictator. Besides, I had an excellent memory so I got along in that job. I stopped my classes at MSU right then, after I realized that I wouldn't be going back to college right away. The stenotype was just coming in, and I had seen it, so I thought, Well, maybe I could take night classes for that. I found a teacher from LBU, Lansing Business School."

One thing led to another: the Liquor Commission expanded its offices and moved to a new location, her old boss left, and the new one was incompetent. "The man who took the job was an alcoholic," she says, "and I was so dumb I didn't know he was an alcoholic. He'd come in feeling terrible in the morning and would just walk the halls. I didn't know what to think, so I started running the department, seeing that the work got out."

And here I was, probably around twenty-two, and I was doing that. There were all these people with a lot of skills, because they had lost their jobs in the depression. They ended up getting political jobs. By this time, it was getting to be on '33. My mother still was working in political fields, and this was a strictly political job.

Besides wheeling and dealing, Lucile was to learn two other lessons at the Liquor Commission: in government, merit often has little to do with either one's compensation or one's position. She claims she was a shy person — this is hard to imagine —

and had to overcome her reluctance to speak up. Her sense of moral outrage gave her courage to do so, as it would on countless future occasions. “They were hiring new girls, and they came in at the same salary that I was getting,” she tells me. “Every payday — and I’d still be running that department — at every payday I thought I should get more money. Well, one day, the head of the whole shebang came up and called me out in the hall and said, “Now, will you get this done, and this done?”

When I lose my temper, I just blow up. I said, “Well, you’re telling me to do all this. Do you realize I’m getting the same amount of money as all those girls in there, that you’re telling me to do much more?” and he said, “We’ll see what we can do,” and he left. He came back pretty soon, called me up, and said, “You’ll be getting your raise this payday.”

After that, the political picture got pretty hot. I think [Republican] Frank Fitzgerald was running for governor then, and one of the ladies on the [Liquor Control] board was a Republican worker.²⁵ So when they were making all these job changes, my mother said, “Maybe you could help her stay on,” and she said, “Well, considering your political activity, I doubt it.” It was about that time that the federal government was starting the National Youth Administration, and that would have been Democratic.²⁶ I got a job in that office because I would have lost my job at the Liquor Commission because it was so political.

Once she moved over to the National Youth Administration, Lucile began to cultivate a broader clientele, utilizing her newly developed skills as a stenographer. The combination of her technical knowledge, her ingenuity, and her political savvy began to be noticed; soon she was working for a number of Michigan state officials, including the state treasurer. These assignments gave her enormously useful practical lessons on the inner workings of government. “It gave me an insight on what was coming when I became a City Council person,” she says now. “All these local governments were coming in and complaining about their problems.”

She also learned how to speak in public. “I was a very shy child, and a shy person,” she says. “I still am. People wouldn’t believe it, but I still am. When I went to high school, I took public speaking, like you had to take, and it was just terribly hard for me.” At that time, something called the People’s University was established, a Depression-era alternative to night school; the public school system was broke and could not afford to offer classes for adults. Instructors in the People’s University — a predecessor to community colleges — were college educated; some were even college professors who taught for free. Because Lucile’s mother wanted to brush up on her skills, she took her daughter along. “So I went with her, and they were all much older people than I,” she recalls. “The course went on for two or three weeks, and finally the instructor said, ‘Next week we’ll all get up and give a three-minute talk.’ I was working for the National Youth Administration at the time.”

Well, I got there early. I was going to tell him I had a sore throat, but he came late, so I couldn’t tell him I had a sore throat. He started calling on these older people, and they all turned him down. Every time they turned him down, I could see his face, and he was just crushed.

We were always brought up to be very sympathetic, so when he called me, I said, “Well, I’m going to tell you about my job . . .” They haven’t been able to shut me up since!²⁷

Flower Power

In 1936, her mother was elected to the State Legislature. Elizabeth Belen served one two-year term; during her tenure she was the only woman in the House and only the third to be elected in Michigan's history. While there, she also became involved with the countrywide National Order of Women Legislators. "Most of them were from the East. In the East they had a lot of women because they had small districts and it paid very little. My mother got \$3.00 a day, which is not very much either," Lucile recalls. While Elizabeth was in office, one of her many accomplishments was passage of a bill requiring state inspection of elevators at a time when people were getting killed in elevator accidents. ("You see these signs in the elevators that say 'Inspected'? That's because of her," says Lucile.) This contributed to her defeat the following year by "the people who had the big office buildings in Detroit that had a big bank of elevators and had to pay all that money. They put money in against her, and we didn't have that kind of money to fight."

The kids worked on their mother's campaign, helping to distribute literature and going door to door. No stranger to politics, Elizabeth had built up her machine by recommending Democratic appointments to the Election Board (the Board comprised both Democrats and Republicans); these were paying jobs that were, in times of such hardship, patronage plums that inspired great loyalty. Years later, Lucile was to continue the tradition of behind-the-scenes power brokering, applying the same skills her mother had perfected. "I could tell what people were thinking many times," she notes, reflecting on some of the traits she acquired so long ago. "I learned their weak spots so that I could get their votes and their support. It takes a little thinking on that manner."

But back in 1936, Lucile had moved from the National Youth Administration to the state Public Utilities Commission. Members of the five-member commission were appointed by the governor, and Lucile's job was to assist the commission's executive secretary. That same year, her parents started the flower shop. Even though it was the height of the Depression, state workers were able to live quite well; they had the discretionary income with which to buy flowers. "Some of the people who are really quite wealthy in this town worked in the state government during the Depression," she points out. "They got their [pay]checks. They could buy these houses that were being foreclosed, for maybe \$3,000. They had the money. The other people didn't have any money."

Why flowers? The answer is every entrepreneur's mantra: *Because it presented a target of opportunity*. "My mother went into the flower business because when she was in nurse's training in Grand Rapids, people would bring loose flowers into the hospital, and the nurses had to put them in water." The demands of running the flower shop involved the whole family, except for her brother Fred, who had gone on to law school at George Washington University. Lucile and her sister Virginia pitched in, eventually spending most of their time there while their mother also continued to remain involved in politics. (Horribly burned in 1929 by a tragic home accident when she was eleven years old, Virginia would endure a lifetime of one plastic surgery operation after another; she died in 1963 of cardiac arrest, while in surgery, at the age of forty-five.)

Belen's Flowers began — in the same house where they had fed people — in the dining room and kitchen; the kitchen was used as a workroom — their downstairs

bathroom, she says, was converted into a kitchen — and the dining room for sales and display purposes. As the business grew, it took over another room, then the basement. Her father would rise early, in time to meet the 3:30 A.M. train as it passed through Lansing from Chicago, carrying flowers they had ordered the day before.

By the 1940s, as World War Two loomed, Lucile continued to work for the Public Utilities Commission, but as the business required more attention she left her state job to help make it grow. She supplemented her income as a freelance court reporter, using an hour or two each day to take depositions and, at night, type them up. By the time the war started, Belen family life revolved around politics and flowers. After her term as a state legislator ended in 1938, her mother went on to serve as vice chair of Michigan's Democratic State Committee and then as a gubernatorial appointee to the state's Workman's Compensation Commission; meanwhile, Lansing's mayor, Sam Street Hughes, who would later become a judge, made her chair of the Ingham County Victory Garden Committee. "She made it a real job, even though it was no pay," Lucile recalls. "They had more victory gardens in this county than almost anyplace else."²⁸

She remembers the World War Two period, as most in her generation do, as a time of sacrifice, pragmatism, and faith. Her brother Fred, a second lieutenant in the Army reserves, was put in charge of security along the East Coast, "all the ports." But the flower shop commanded most of the family's time. After the war, her brother stayed in Washington and worked for a congressman; eventually he took, and passed, the Washington and Michigan bar exams, yet remained in Washington the rest of his life. Back home, when automotive factories resumed their peacetime manufacturing, state employees took home more wages, and GIs returned to start families, the flower business picked up, too. (Her mother continued to remain active in politics and made a run for Congress; she won the primary but lost the finals.) As it flourished, another store was opened, alongside a hospital, and staff was hired. The whole family, except for Fred, was working full time, but business was booming, which gave Lucile and her mother a chance to think of something new.

In 1954, they decided to open a design school. There were only two in the country at that time, one in Texas and one in Chicago. The Belen School of Floral Design, the nation's third, offered a week-long intensive course once a year, usually in midsummer. Its students came from everywhere; over the forty years of its existence, more than one thousand retail florists from throughout the country would come to claim Belen's School of Floral Design as the place where they got their start. Certified by the state of Michigan, the design school provided professional support in the form of theoretical and hands-on knowledge; it also helped expand the family's network beyond Lansing. "It was a high point of life," Lucile says now. "We enjoyed it. We met people from all over." Topics ranged from basic floral design to special approaches for weddings, funerals, and other important occasions. Lucile was the primary instructor, although she was helped by another woman from a nearby town; because class size generally was capped at thirty-five, "everybody got some personalized attention. They wanted us to have it more than once a year, and for us to offer a higher master course," she says. "But one week was all I could take out of the business."²⁹

The Belens did not charge much in fees or expenses; what little revenue was generated (maybe a couple thousand dollars) was reinvested in Lucile's political cam-

paigns. “I can say this about my campaigns over the years: I always was able to charge off half of it to business,” Miss Belen told me in a hilarious aside. “I used postal cards, and on one-half of the front of the postal card I put an ad for Belen’s Flowers. On the other side was my political message. We also had billboards. All during the year I advertised the flower shop with my picture, so that when election time came along, we advertised with my picture, and they knew who we were. And we got the business, too.” (Clean election proponents, take note: no conflict of interest was perceived at that time.)

The Politics of Integrity

By the 1950s Belen’s Flowers was thriving. It was time for Lucile Belen to make her entry into organized politics, having apprenticed herself for decades and amassed a mighty arsenal of contacts, insights, and experiences. Her election in 1957 marked the beginning of an extraordinary term of service, one that broke gender barriers left and right while she participated in most of the major economic, political, and cultural events in Lansing’s history.

The beginning of her political career was marked by the kind of progressive flair that once characterized Michigan politics: a white woman, and staunch Democrat at that, runs for a nonpartisan office and is almost defeated by a black man. She was encouraged to run by a family friend. One day, Lansing’s mayor, an affable man, Ralph Crego, a former businessman and former grocer — he also lived next door to my grandparents, and I remember him from my childhood — walked into the flower shop and, as Lucile puts it, said, “Who’s going to run for that vacancy?” — referring to a seat from the old Third Ward. (At that time Lansing’s city government was unwieldy, with sixteen councilors and a weak mayor’s office. The new city charter changed this, streamlining the ward system from eight to four, with four councilors elected at-large and four from the wards. It also strengthened the mayor’s authority to appoint department heads, thus adjusting the balance of power between the council and mayor.) “He looked at me and said, ‘Why don’t you run?’ And we sat around the table that night, the family, and talked about it,” she recalls, referring to the site that had, for more than twenty-five years, served as ground zero for political deliberation. “I told them, and they said, ‘Well, why don’t we do this, because we’ve been working for everybody else?’”

So I got the petitions out and I ran. There was a black man who ran at the same time. He lost by about twenty votes, but *The State Journal* made a mistake in their publication, making it look like he had won. But he lost. So you can imagine what the feeling was like when it was discovered he didn’t win.

Well, I got elected, and at the same time, the voters approved a new city charter which made my term fifteen months rather than two years. So I served for fifteen months, and then there was a new election. That’s when your dad [Max Murningham] ran, and he and I got the most votes.

After her election to the Lansing City Council in 1957, she proved to be a highly skilled and effective colleague; she was elected council president in 1960, something unheard of in municipal politics across the region. “The men elected me,” she says proudly.

This is where some of my earliest memories come in: I was about nine or ten years old, and remember her no-nonsense, authoritative manner. She was always

friendly and warm, but because she sat up on the podium with other city officials, I knew she was, well, *different* from other adult women I knew. (I used to revel in attending City Council meetings, watching silently from a seat in the auditorium as councilors and other city department heads interacted with each other and citizens in what appeared to be a play. Theater. Politics as well-mannered performance. The essential rituals of civic deliberation and citizen participation, often boring to most yet endlessly exciting to a kid whose father was involved. Miss Belen stood out from the others, but they all played starring roles in this, the latest episode of the ongoing series, Democracy in America. I developed a superior attitude about occupying this insider position, a feeling one does not easily outgrow.)

How would she characterize her politics as it evolved over the years? she is asked. What role did she play among others, many of whom were elected through the efforts of special interest or neighborhood groups?

“When I got elected — and this is funny — everybody thought I was going to be so liberal, but I turned out to be the most conservative one there because I was a business owner,” she recalls, referring to her location on the political spectrum. “But I was the most nonpartisan of anybody there, even though I probably had more partisan affiliation. . . . I was in a different position than many of the people on the council. I was my own boss. I didn’t owe anything to anybody. I mean, I didn’t have to vote for something because I worked with somebody. I was a business person, and I thought differently.”

Lasting Imprints: Have We Got the Votes?

“It’s been a great life,” Lucile Belen told me on several occasions, an understatement to those who know her and the impact she has had. Her papers — many have been lost along the way — have been given to Lansing’s city library, while those of her mother have gone to the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor; her brother Fred’s papers have gone to the LBJ Presidential Library at the University of Texas in Austin. “I also have a box of my mother’s clippings and one of my dad’s and sister’s in a cedar chest,” she says.

But there are other records, too, etched in the memories and hearts of those whose lives she has touched. This energetic woman, her bright blue eyes blazing, a smile on her face, and wearing her trademark hat and corsage, is a fixture in Lansing’s life. What do her friends and admirers have to say about her influence on the city she loves so dearly? On them as people? What are her legacies? And how can these contributions be carried on in this era of special-interest politics and the commercialization of public life? What enduring values and principles does she embody that can help invigorate our civil society and politics?

I asked a few of her friends and colleagues these questions, which yielded expressions of endearment as well as recollections. A sampler is presented here, providing some snapshots of the instrumental role she has played regarding women’s ascension to public leadership, local politics, and government during periods of enormous social and political upheaval, economic growth and development in conjunction with community improvement, and the stature of Lansing’s nonprofit organizations — particularly health care, an extension of her mother’s earlier passion through the first part of the twentieth century. “All in the family,” you might say. What emerges is

the portrait of a woman of honor, a highly skilled politician and businesswoman (in the best sense of those words), a tactician with principles, and a public servant whose sense of humor kept her grounded in the day-to-day work of the people's business, as well as her own.

"Ingham Medical was named for her not so much for what she did for the institution, but what she represented to the institution," says Ed McCree, who for many years served as the medical center's president and continues to remain actively involved.

And I think if I was to quickly summarize what she meant to us . . . She said something to me one day that I will never forget. I was really despondent about some issue, and I cannot remember what it was. She sat in front of me, and she said, "Ed, they will always be after you, but *never* give up!" And I remember that so vividly, because that is Lucile! She does not *ever* give up. And if she gets something that she wants to promote and push, she never gives up. She helped Ingham Medical emerge from the tuberculosis days. She helped it become a cutting-edge medical center, particularly in the area of heart and orthopedic. And she did it by example, by her verve, by her tenacity, by her willingness to go out on a limb for you, and by her faithfulness. She was *always* there. She came to everything you asked her to come to. She had a presence that you could not duplicate. Those are the kinds of things she gave us. She has influenced a body of people, and you never know which one's going to emerge as a leader. But they will take with them the axioms of life that she has to offer. The fundamentals of being true and being right and being dedicated are still there. And you just have to hope that she was dynamic, that she impregnated someone else with those thoughts and concepts, and I know she did.³⁰

One prominent local leader who has been touched by the Belen mystique is Sandy Draggoo, who for seventeen years has served as executive director of the Capital Area Transportation Authority (CATA), the regional public transportation provider for the Greater Lansing area. CATA operates at least forty routes and, with its \$20 million, provided 6.5 million passenger trips in 2000. Lucile's legacy, according to Draggoo, is that of an independent, savvy, and diplomatic woman who has forged a path for others to follow, including her. Draggoo credits Belen as instrumental in helping her obtain her position as chief operating officer in what is traditionally a male bastion, overcoming gender prejudice at a time when few women were accepted as public administrators. As she tells me her story, I am reminded of how much progress has been made regarding equal rights, even with the challenges now facing us.

Back in 1984, Draggoo had worked for many years in CATA's senior office, even serving as a thirty-day interim director following the resignation of its long-time director. As the board geared up to find a new director, Draggoo found herself about to be overlooked as a serious candidate, even though she was highly seasoned in the art and science of management operations, acquired both during her eleven years assisting her predecessor and with her earlier work at Diamond REO, an automotive manufacturing company.

"Lucile was on the City Council at that time, and was appointed by the mayor to the CATA board," Draggoo recalls. "I had only known Lucile Belen as a name, and our company had always bought flowers there. She was new to the board at that time." But despite Draggoo's capable work in the thirty-day transition period, the board had identified someone else to step in as interim manager while a nationwide search was conducted for a permanent appointment. While Draggoo had her own

mixed feelings about pursuing the post — she was, after all, “a preacher’s wife with no education besides a business degree” — she was disappointed by the board’s apparent lack of confidence in her abilities. These misgivings quickly dissolved as a result of Lucile’s vocal (and indignant) support, aimed squarely at the board’s position.

“Lucile was sitting there in that board meeting and all of a sudden she just started to spout,” Draggoo told me. “She kind of pounded her fist on the table and said, *This is ridiculous! If that was a man in front of you, with all these years of experience with this place, and you had asked him to take over, you would say to him ‘You take over and we’re going to go out and do this search.’ Then you’d let that man run it. Just because Sandy is a woman . . . Why don’t we just leave her in there, and then go out and do your search? That’s what you’d do if she were a man!*”

And those people sat there on that board and kind of dropped their mouths, stunned. It was totally, totally out of the blue. They didn’t expect that at all. They looked at her and said, *Yes, ma’am!* They had nothing they could say. So they turned to me and said, *Would you! be willing to do it?* And I said, *Sure*, and so I did it.

Eventually, following a national search, she was hired as CATA’s executive director and assumed office in January 1985. She has remained ever since, receiving numerous accolades for her fine stewardship. Meanwhile, Lucile Belen continued to serve as a member of CATA’s board until 1998 and, according to Draggoo, loved it. She fondly remembers Belen’s trademark style, which included what people affectionately referred to as her “rants.” That is, she would express her indignation at some decision or comment and startle everyone with the intensity of her expression.

“She would come into the board meeting, with her hats and everything,” Draggoo recalls, and then goes on to recount how she would role-play with her staff in preparation for possible eruptions. “I would, for many years, change my tone in a meeting with staff, and kind of slap my hand down, and I would be Lucile. They then had to talk to me as they would to Lucile, because I would know where Lucile would be coming from on an issue. There was one message that just wasn’t getting through, and I told them, *Guys, she’s just gonna tear this one apart.*

So the marketing person made me a hat, and brought it in as a joke. There’s a picture of me, sitting in the conference room with this hat on, so that they could say, *Okay, Miss Belen, this is what we want to do.* The issues with Lucile always were, *This is our money! Don’t anybody ever be dumb enough to say, ‘Well it doesn’t cost us anything. It’s federal money’ or ‘It’s state money.’* Oh, my goodness, you’d be torn to shreds, because to Lucile, it was *every* taxpayer’s money, and you had to guard every taxpayer’s money. So don’t talk about *It’s only a million dollars.* It would be, *What do you mean, it’s only a million dollars?* And on and on and on. So you learned how to speak in Lucile’s language. As staff, we would use that terminology quite often.

The biggest thing that we always would use in role-playing Lucile would be when we were putting a budget together. We would ask ourselves, *Could we justify that to Lucile? Could we say that whatever was worthwhile?* Because those are the things that Lucile would look for. She would be in a board meeting, and she would sometimes say she was going to rest her eyes. She’d kind of shut her eyes and she’d be sitting there. A fool would have thought she was asleep. But as soon as she heard something, she’d just start right out talking.

Looking back, Sandy Draggoo acknowledges that nowadays she would take a different approach in pursuing her career objectives, but things were different then.

Her sense of self in 1984, and Lansing's mores at that time, were not conducive to women holding major administrative positions; it was (and remains) a male-dominated world, particularly in the transit industry. "There were very, very few women transit managers in the country," she points out. "I was one of the first ten, I'm certain. It was just very different. Women could always be the assistants and do the work, but they were never there as the leader."

Sandy Draggoo is a highly respected public administrator who happens to be a woman. She credits much of her success to the lessons Lucile Belen taught her, especially those concerning board-staff relationships and the importance of one-to-one contact. "Lucile, and her style is a big piece of that with me," she says. "Lucile fights for right, but she also tells the world how much she loves CATA and how much she loves me. I've been chewed out by her many times, but that was just her coming through, the way she does."

What is the Belen legacy? Draggoo is asked. As she looks ahead, how is that legacy being continued? "By trying to do the same things with lots of women, especially women here that work for CATA, trying to give them the self-confidence that they can do anything they want," she replies. "Trying to help women by telling them, *Don't ever think that there is something beneath you in any job . . .* and trying to let them know of the struggles that I had to get here. Telling my daughter this, and my granddaughters. With the kids growing up knowing, *Those are Grandma's buses . . .* The help of people like Lucile — I wouldn't be where I am, and therefore, it's my obligation, my duty, my *honor* to pass that on."³¹

Former Lansing mayor Terry McKane (1981–1992) cites Lucile Belen's ability to adapt to changing times without compromising her principles or respect for fellow colleagues as one of her memorable qualities. In this coarsened era of meanspirited public discourse, where politics is more like entertainment, even blood sport, such a dignified, honorable stance seems rather quaint. "Lucile was very comfortable in the policymaking role, but she also knew how, behind the scenes, to place her influence on the administration," he says, and then goes on to describe a time when he invited Lansing's former mayors to join him in the mayor's office for a group photo, commemorating Lansing's sesquicentennial, in 1984. "I invited her there, too, and she came," he told me — an acknowledgment of the important role she has played in the life of the city.

"I think she had a lot to do with making possible the progress of women in public life in our community," McKane continues. "She sounded the trumpet for equal rights for women, and equal roles in public life for women, not just ERA kinds of legalities but true engagement. And she never allowed the rest of us around her to forget it."

Another part of her legacy is that public service is a contribution made by gentlemen and gentlewomen who respect one another (albeit with differences in philosophy), who respect the public and treat the public with respect, and who know there are limits as to what can and should be said, and how it should be said. In other words, she has not only been a woman in public service, but a *lady* in public service, in the finest sense, and has taught a lot of other people, both men and women, through her example.

Terry McKane, who first entered city politics in 1971, was elected to the City Council as one of its youngest members after narrowly defeating the longtime incumbent, Louis Adado, a popular man. McKane's upset win left him wondering how he would be received by Adado's close council colleagues, particularly Lucile Belen.

As it turned out, he did not have to worry. “She treated me with respect as a colleague,” he says. “Sometimes the mother in her, shall we say, would show. She proceeded to teach me some lessons now and then, and sometimes, very firmly.”

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lansing, like many American cities, had to cope with the turbulence wrought by racial tensions, protest movements, the emerging power of grassroots organizations, and an activist federal government that had begun to pour millions into urban areas. There were so many factions and fault lines that partisan politics seemed less relevant, particularly in a town that prided itself on its nonpartisan government. “I went about the process of getting to know the other councillors as quickly as possible,” McKane says, and discovered that he shared Lucile Belen’s political philosophy. “I decided right away that she was pretty much Democratic, even liberal Democratic, in her support for Model Cities and other programs that more conservative people did not support.”

Even though I had come in as an ex-Republican, I decided it was to my best advantage as a nonpartisan elected official to really become nonpartisan, so I gave up my membership in the Republican Party. I still don’t belong to either party, and have been religiously, if you will, nonpartisan ever since. But I knew that she and I had a lot in common in terms of our philosophy. I was a sort of social liberal and fiscal conservative, if you will, which adds up to moderate.

Throughout the 1970s, in spite of conflicting views as to the role of government — federal, state, or local — in public life, the Lansing City Council was in a good position to secure federally-funded programs such as Model Cities and its successor, community development block grants. Its mayor, however, did not support bringing in outside funding because he thought there would be undesirable strings attached. (As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, my father aggressively pursued federal funding and was responsible for obtaining Lansing’s first round of Model Cities grants in 1969, which set a healthy precedent for future administrations. Dad’s successor as mayor, Gerald Graves, was far more conservative and viewed Model Cities and other forms of government funding, state or local, as intrusive.)

Soon there was a gap between the mayor and council, and local politics grew more volatile as open and honest debate got sidelined by theatrics. The politics of high-pitched confrontation jostled with the politics of low-key compromise, thus posing a challenge to incumbents practiced in the traditional art of diplomacy, the free and intelligent exchange of ideas and opinions, and horse-trading. Nevertheless, McKane told me that a strong council coalition helped to override mayoral vetoes and reduce political fragmentation and that he used this period to hone his political skills. As the political winds shifted to a more liberal direction by the mid-1970s, McKane applied these skills to mediate among councilors whose political agendas did not always coincide. The disputes were usually over tactics rather than strategy, and whatever shared political philosophy there was became bruised and battered over conflicts about process and posturing before television cameras, which were now broadcasting council proceedings.

“Lucile was liberal, too, but in a different style — a different generation, shall we say,” McKane recalls, referring to the spectrum of progressive politics displayed by majority councilors. “She became more understanding of different styles and showed her willingness to change, if necessary, but not change to the point of damaging her principles or not being true to herself. She was willing to give on some of the superfluous issues and move the city forward. Other people saw what she was

doing, and followed her example, which helped to keep us moving forward together as opposed to apart.”

In 1981, Terry McKane was elected Lansing’s mayor (the first of three four-year terms), and continued to rely upon Lucile Belen even when they disagreed. “She had the decency to not do that in public,” he says, referring again to her “motherly” role of advice giving. “She wouldn’t hesitate to say what she thought, whether it was to me or to anybody else. But she always had the decency to do it in the back room and not in front of the TV cameras.”³²

She was sensitive to the fact that we were all elected officials, and embarrassing one another in front of the public is quite a sin. Even after I was in the mayor’s office, she knew she could call me anytime and I would set aside whatever I was doing. She would have her say, and then she would be on her way, and that would be it. We treated each other with a great deal of political and personal respect.

“Respect” is a word that comes up often in people’s conversations about Lucile Belen, a trait further forged in the crucible of racial and class tensions, particularly in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Even though Lansing is considered as progressive compared to most American cities with respect to racial integration, the town has had its problems, particularly exacerbated by the influx of white Southerners in the late 1960s. (Michigan voters supported George Wallace’s candidacy for president in 1968. These were the same kind of voters who opposed my father’s 1969 reelection race as mayor because, I was often told, he was “too friendly” with blacks, and Model Cities had resulted in unwelcome black relocation to their neighborhoods. Dad lost by a couple hundred votes thanks to precincts dominated by Wallace supporters; it was a stunning defeat, one of the bitter fruits of white ignorance and anger and a major setback to the politics of integrity.)

Lucile Belen continued to be a staunch advocate for human rights and racial justice, a position she maintained throughout her political career. (She supported the creation of city hall’s human relations office, which was established in 1965 during my father’s administration to cultivate diversity and address the concerns of Lansing’s minority population; Dad appointed his longtime friend and former high school boxing partner, Richard D. Letts, to the post, a position Letts held with great distinction for many years. Indeed, along with my dear friend Linda Hunter Williams, who now resides in Detroit and, as an educator, continues to do wonderful work, I spent many of my teenage years working with Letts on a variety of human relations projects. Dick Letts, like Lucile Belen, would become a Lansing legend; he died in 1997.)

“She was still there, as part of her liberal Democratic background, when we had no representative of the African-American community on the City Council,” says McKane. “When I was pushing for changes in the human relations ordinance as a council member, she was fully supportive. As mayor, when I made sure that we were only the third city in the state to have an affirmative action plan approved by the state of Michigan, she was right there, supporting my efforts. So I appreciated it, and I know the black community appreciated it, too, especially the older members who remember.”³³

One of the activists from that era agrees with McKane’s assessment of Belen’s pragmatic attitude toward diversity and her aversion to partisan or “identity” politics concerning Lansing’s well-being. Sid Worthington, a man with two law degrees, served on the City Council for ten and a half years. He puts it this way: “Lucile

Belen is truly comfortable in her own skin. Her identity was certainly as a council-woman, but she is also a businesswoman, and very active on nonprofit boards. There are a lot of things that she has contributed to in the community, real serious activity and contributions aside from the City Council.”

Worthington lives a block away from Belen’s Flowers, but only came to know her in the late 1970s. He recalls his first meeting with her, which was in his capacity as chair of a citizens’ committee comprising a broad coalition of organizations formed to facilitate passage of a new city charter. The objective was to strengthen the mayor’s office, consolidating executive authority and positioning the City Council as more of a policymaking body. Proposed charter amendments already had been defeated on two occasions; during those campaigns, Belen and Worthington were on opposite sides. At issue was the extent of executive oversight the mayor’s office should have over Lansing’s Board of Water and Light and the police and fire boards. The third attempt at charter reform brought Belen and Worthington together. “She was the one who would go out and raise the money and was the name,” Worthington recalls. “I was really just the bookkeeper, the guy who made sure that the report gets filed. I was thirty at the time.”

We always went out to the Kellogg Center [at MSU] to have lunch. I worked for the House of Representatives at the time, and I would go out the side door, and she would pick me up and we would go out there. We would go over the campaign and what was going on. I was really the administrative assistant. I may have had the title as chairman, but I knew who was in charge. And really and truly, that was the way it had to work, if it was going to work. That was really the first experience, which led into my running for City Council.

Lansing voters approved the new charter in 1978; in 1979, Worthington ran for an at-large seat, was elected, and joined the council in 1980, one of a younger crowd that began to serve in the early 1980s. “Lucile was always ageless and, in a lot of ways, became sort of my champion,” he says. “She ran interference. I still have the endorsement ad. I look about nine, and she looks a lot younger herself.” (She was sixty-eight.) He credits her, too, with knowing how to work Lansing’s informal network, something he claims he never quite understood, yet acknowledges as part of the connective tissue that helps hold the body politic together. “Lansing’s a smaller town,” he says, “and I never understood the network.”

Lucile understood it and was one of the best politicians I’ve ever known. She’d start talking to people, and it would [circulate among] this sort of underground. For many years I’d sit there and I’d always say, *Wait ’til the din of the conversation among people in this community starts to rise*. And when you can feel that . . . There is this network of conversation that goes on in this community that makes a determination, and you can get a feel for which way they’re going by this network. Lucile was an integral part of it. I don’t think a lot of communities have this, what I used to call “back fence politics.”

He then pays tribute to this brand of public official. “In fact, she and [former Michigan governor] Bill Milliken were always at the top of my list as *politicians*,” he says. “They were the two best that I’d seen and had a chance to work with.” Why are they the best? he is asked. What traits did Lucile Belen and Bill Milliken exhibit that made them exemplary? His answers should be emblazoned on any would-be candidate’s forearm because they have to do with openness, humility, and respect, rare virtues in this era of klieg lights, TV cameras, and twenty-four-hour news

cycles. “They always kept all avenues open,” he replies. “They always worked hard to keep lines of communication to everybody open. You never saw Lucile cut off or get mad at or say *I’ll never talk to that person again.*”

There were people who mere mortals like myself simply couldn’t stand or couldn’t talk to. She never had that. Second of all, she is not an ideologue. She understands what she wants and the direction in which she wants to go, but she’s always willing to look for a form of compromise, where the other person gets something out of it. Lots of people couldn’t get to that point, but Lucile was always able to get to that point. She would always look for where she could make her deal, or get that person so they could go along with it. And that’s the art of politics, along with the patience of the whole thing.

And she knew how far she could push people. She took the time to get to know and learn people, and could she push their buttons, and where your humor lines were. You know, what would make you laugh. She has a very dry sense of humor. You would never think that she has a great sense of humor, but she’d sit up there sometimes when these people . . . When we went on television, the wackos, particularly when the moon got full, would come down to the council. She’d lean over to me and she’d cross her arms, and you just *knew* what she was thinking.

All of that stuff on television really bothered her. Since all [of those earlier] meetings were such bloodbaths, a lot of people would watch them. But it ended up turning so many people off, it worked to my advantage when I came along.

In his campaign, Worthington was positioned as a compromise candidate, less controversial than the incumbent, who was known for his confrontational style — and his tendency to drag council meetings on well past 11:00 P.M., a real no-no to most members. “Of course, Lucile wanted to be home on Monday nights by nine to see M*A*S*H,” he recalls, repeating an anecdote others had also told me. *What a hoot, I thought, this human side of such a dedicated, no-nonsense servant.* “She considered it just beyond the pale how anybody could even think about holding a council meeting beyond the starting point of M*A*S*H on Monday night!”

Sid Worthington has many more anecdotes about Lucile Belen that spring from his decade-plus years of council service and their personal friendship. Looking back and looking forward, he says that there is no one else like her. “It’s like the sports announcer who says, *Who’s going to be the next Willie Mays?* I always think to myself, *There never is going to be another Willie Mays! There may be a Mickey Mantle coming down the road, or a Derek Jeter, but there’ll never be another Willie Mays.*”

He continues by taking the long view, the one that gives perspective on the local titans of the twentieth century. “One of the things that I always admired about her was that both she and her mother were here for nearly a century of *true* leadership, by two women role models, for the community.”

And nobody ever gave two thoughts about the fact that they were women. They never really wore it on their sleeves in terms of *I am woman, hear me roar!* They just went about very effectively — and particularly, I think, Lucile. She carried out her duty, she did her job very, very well, and as a result, by her actions was just an absolutely outstanding role model for women. And that was without ever having to say it, you know? I just always thought that was neat. She was truly ahead of her time — and for that matter, Lansing was ahead of its time.³⁴

The Belen legacy, according to Mark Latterman, is one of enormous integrity that is characterized by two primary lessons: *There is no limit to what you can achieve if you do not concern yourself with who gets the public credit for it, and Never hold a*

grudge, because if you hold a grudge, the negativism you are holding within yourself is going to damage you down the road. Latterman is a prominent lawyer *cum* lobbyist who has known her for decades; like everyone else, he is unabashed in his praise of her and for what she has meant to Lansing. He considers her a mentor, the person to whom he would turn to get advice, the one whose demeanor he would come to emulate. “She simply knew psychologically how to deal with people. The manner in which I have learned to treat public officials, I have learned from her, and the [maxim] to always deal honestly, because if you are dealing with people you can trust, that is still the best way to work,” he wrote me a few days after our talk. “I never misrepresented anything to her, and she never misrepresented anything to me or anyone else that I know of. There are not many political people you can say that about.”³⁵

His firm, Latterman & Associates, handles a range of political issues, including those concerning urban development, license acquisition, hospitality and entertainment, zoning, and banking. In addition to his professional practice, which primarily involves representing clients having major problems with the city and the county, Latterman is involved in various nonprofit organizations in mid-Michigan and has lived in the Lansing area full time since the late 1960s. Over the years, he and Belen forged an informal alliance, “a very long and fruitful relationship that has been a lasting imprint on me and has played a constructive role in my own life and work, and on that of Lansing,” he told me. For twenty years, they would meet for lunch at the University Club every Wednesday, and they would converse, by his estimates, two or three times a day. It was in these conversations that strategies were formulated, alliances formed, and tactics discussed. In short, it was an epicenter of the “old boys’ network” — without such gender distinctions. These were “power lunches” before the term was invented. “We would talk city business,” he says. “It was great. I learned so much.”

How did Latterman first link up with her? “My first encounter with Miss Belen was in the early 1970s, when I was retained by another law firm that represented Coca-Cola,” he told me. “Coca-Cola wanted to move their plant out of Lansing to Delta Township, and they needed permission from the city to make that move. At that time there were no reciprocating agreements, and obviously there was some dissatisfaction that a major plant was leaving Lansing for another municipality.”

I asked if I could come see her at her flower shop and I went over there. I was told the best way to deal with her was to kind of act like I didn’t know anything and ask her for help on how to do things. First of all, this was true. I did not know how to [gain council approval], it had never been done before, and there was a lot of controversy about them leaving. So I didn’t know anything, and acting like it was true. I told her I didn’t know what the procedure was, or why they would let Coca-Cola leave. Their plant was half-way done, and they didn’t want to finish it until they got the approval. And Delta and Lansing had been mad at each other for something else that had nothing to do with this. So I told her I didn’t know what I was doing, but if I could pull it off, I would be a hero to Coca-Cola and maybe could do some more of this political work. I told her that she was going to have to just tell me what to do. I had a blank piece of paper and a pen.

I’m sure she felt sorry for me. She took me under her wing and told me exactly what to do and who to contact at the city. She had decided it was okay, that Coca-Cola was going to leave anyway, no matter what. I said to her that maybe we could end up going both ways on these things, so if someone wants to come from Delta we can do a reciprocating order — which we did, but it was years later. As a result of what she told me to

do, it got done. I was a big hero, and it really started me on my current job, which is to do these kinds of things all the time. I found out it was a lot more fun to do that than to try criminal cases, and hope to get paid.

Latterman then goes on to describe a similar experience with Continental Cable, the Boston-based cable provider chosen to wire Lansing in 1976, which at the time was the company's second biggest franchise. Continental Cable was Latterman's largest client for twenty-five years, and for a long time the company was a strong presence in the state of Michigan. He credits Belen with helping to make Continental such a good corporate citizen, getting them involved in Lansing Community College and other local civic organizations. "My best story about her is that issue," he says. "She would always ask, *What are you doing for the community?*" He goes on to describe her opposition to the renewal of a commercial tax abatement for a corporate client that was neglecting its civic responsibility, and his efforts to persuade the company to ante up. "I told them, *Unless you step up to the plate, you're not going to get the abatement. It's that simple.*" he recalls. Eventually, his client agreed and proceeded to join the board of Lansing Community College's foundation — which included service as board chair — and provided financial backing for scholarships.

The name of the game, Latterman continues, was that overused term "leverage," almost a dirty word in this era of influence peddling, bipartisan corruption, so-called corporate welfare, and self-dealing. "She never, ever, *ever* personally got a thing," he says. "Not ever. Not ever."

Those of us in politics know that leverage is used for many things much less meritorious than that. Miss Belen would never do anything for any gain to her. The only gain she ever cared about was the city's and the community's. She has done so much for this area, and I am so glad that someone is going to put it in writing so that others will perhaps benefit. The things that she did, she really never did for herself. She always indicated what was best for the city. I know this sounds trite, but when you review all these things, they all add up to that. There are many, many examples, but I have just mentioned a couple that we have worked on. There were many, many more during that time.

Every politician does constituent work, and the good ones know how to calibrate constituent needs in such a way as to get things done without compromising one's principles. As we have already heard from several sources, Lucile Belen excelled at this and was a grand master at deal making. Most of all, "she knew how to count to five. *Have we got the votes?*" — referring to the bottom-line position fellow councilors were going to take on an issue, particularly the important task of choosing who was going to be council president or vice president. "Nobody could count like Miss Belen," he says. "We had to learn how to count to five. Once you counted to five, you were all right." Then he adds, almost as an afterthought but something essential to her character, "She never, ever held a grudge, even when she should have."

There were many times that people took political shots at her, and even many times when I was holding a grudge for her. But she just did not hold one. She would get mad at people and she would yell at people — she had no problem with that. But two hours later, it was over. She'd just get over it.

That was another thing I learned. One time she told me that when she was not sure she had the votes, she would just scream really loud and pound the table, and most of the time everyone would agree with her. It was just another one of her strategy ideas

which, of course, worked, particularly in those days. She was just such a realist about those things. She had an ability to deal with people that you just do not read in books.

She was always looking for the positive way. Certainly nobody like her that I've ever seen.³⁶

Emerson Ohl, who has known Lucile Belen longer than anyone with whom I spoke, is a gracious, decent, dedicated man who served with distinction as Lansing's chief of economic development during the halcyon years of growth and transformation. Like others of his ilk, he gave much to the community he served; in addition to bricks and mortar, Ohl was a welcome presence on local nonprofit boards and, at his eightieth birthday celebration, was honored by a large group of fans that included Michigan's governor, a U.S. senator, and congressmen. Throughout the lively late 1960s, lean 1970s, and comeback 1980s, he was centrally involved in a range of bond issues and financing deals that helped Lansing position itself as a thriving city; a visitor sees his (and Belen's) invisible imprint everywhere, from the Riverfront Park to office buildings, hospitals, schools, and the midtown Lansing Center, a 75,000 square foot exhibition hall that includes a 13,500 square foot ballroom named after — you guessed it — Lucile Belen. In fact, Emerson Ohl is responsible for making arrangements for the bust of Miss Belen that is on display outside the ballroom, in the main concourse.

Ohl is now in his eighties and, like Miss Belen, comes from that generation of public servants who served with honor and integrity and came to government only after achieving success in other fields. His recollections are woven into the fabric of the Belen family's life, both public and private, and bring us back in many ways to where this story begins.

He has known the Belen family for more than fifty years. After his military service in the 1940s, Ohl went to Western Michigan University and obtained his diploma; he joined Michigan Bell in Grand Rapids, but soon the company transferred him to Lansing, where he met the Belens: Mr. Belen and Elizabeth and their children, Lucile, Fred, and Virginia. He is quick to point out their stature, and Lucile's role as a standard-bearer.

"Elizabeth was one of the first women in the legislature," he reminded me. "She was one sharp gal. Very, very active in health care, nursing, this type of thing. There were several articles and awards that were given to Elizabeth as a result of taking assistance to people during the Depression, and immediately thereafter." He then goes on to recall the Belen house, the one I, too, dimly remember because I used to walk past it on my way to elementary school, the same one that was opened during the Depression to those who had nothing to eat. "It was a beautiful old Victorian home," he said. "A huge porch winding around all of it. The floral shop was in several of the rooms."

Mr. Belen was primarily in the food business — a butcher in a food store. Elizabeth was a very, very aggressive Democratic politician and worked very, very cohesively with the publics around here. She was just one grand lady. And I think Lucile has taken after her in terms of team building. The name became very, very important to Elizabeth, and thus to Lucile. They were just a great family. I got acquainted with them when they had the floral shop there on Kalamazoo Street.

Because Ohl was the Lansing-area regional manager for Michigan Bell, he had frequent contact with political figures in both the state capitol and city hall. It was only natural that he would have dealings with the Belens, both for political and per-

sonal reasons. He learned early on the power of these informal relationships and, years later, continued to marvel at the breadth, depth, and quality of Lucile Belen's network. Since the lifeblood of politics is relationships, more than anything else, listening to Ohl confirms what we already know: Lucile Belen was a spectacular politician who gave extraordinary amounts of time and money to her community.

"She took after her mother and was very, very active in the nursing profession and very, very active at Lansing Community College about that same time," he told me, referring to her years of service on the boards of Ingham Medical and LCC. "Lucile has been on the LCC Foundation [board] for years, and has given time and money and effort for LCC. Worked numerous details out for the development of the campus, right downtown — probably was the moving force to have our community college right in the downtown area."

Years later, when she was on the Economic Development Corporation board as its chairman, she hand-picked people that she knew would be giving of tremendous service. Jumping ahead, she always made sure there were dedicated people on the council committees whom she knew would be of great service to the city.

Ohl reflects upon his tenure as head of Lansing's Economic Development Corporation, as well as other assignments that brought him into contact with her. "She doesn't hesitate to state her mind," he says. "I'd disagree periodically with Lucile, and she'd get mad. I mean, really mad. But then the following day she'd call you and say, *I get real mad when you do, in my mind, foolish things, but I don't stay mad, and I want to keep in contact with you!* It was almost a tribute. She can really rant and rave, but she's so damn logical on most issues — I don't know if she ever went to accounting school or anything like that, but she could always point out errors. She had just an unbelievable ability to recognize things awry."

Ohl reiterates the theme that runs throughout everyone's description of Lucile Belen and the life she has led. "She's just been involved in so many different things that you can't even remember them all," he says. He also notes that her brand of politics is the kind that transcends polarization and meanspiritedness. "As a businesswoman, a rare businesswoman [in those days], she had to capitalize on contacts to assist her business," he says. "Through her involvement in the nonprofit world, for example, she made contacts with the people who were managers to assist in their business. So when there was a volunteer recognition dinner, Lucile furnished the flowers for that event."

She did this in an unbelievably skillful way, [knowing that] the intimacy with the non-profits, as well as the profits, would assist her in an overall atmosphere of success.

What I'm trying to say is that she uses her contacts and the friends she's got to fulfill her business and civic responsibilities. And she doesn't hesitate to indicate when people should contribute to the city. She did that when she was on the council and after she'd been on the council. She's always been strategic. . . . This city will miss her.³⁷

What about her election loss in 1993? How did that affect people who may never have seen her as vulnerable? "We knew that it could happen, but we all watched, holding our breath, about how she would react," says Ed McCree. It would have been very easy for her to disappear into the flower shop, and that would have been the end of it.

But that was not what happened. She was on the street the next morning, she was calling people, thanking them for their support. She was saying, "You know, everybody

loses sometimes, and I've had a good life on the City Council, and there's still a lot of other stuff for me to do." And I'll tell you, that was a remarkable lesson, all by itself, because she was so dedicated to the City Council, and so much a part of it. There was really no reason for her to be turned down, and yet it happened. I think her skill in navigating those waters and preserving her self-imagery and continuing without a blip in the movement was just another remarkable story.³⁸

The stuff of integrity, where you maintain consistency come hell or high water.

Final Thoughts

There are some who might say times have changed. Public life is more complicated, and our politics have become impoverished. Maybe so, but I am not one of those who believe that with change comes difference. The more things change . . . Well, you know the rest. The cycle begins again. More daunting, perhaps, but nevertheless an extension of tradition, values, beliefs, and ideas that reside at the core of our identity as American citizens, an identity less rooted in *place* than in a *way of life*, and therefore an identity deriving more from principles and human nature than from nationalism.

Yet human nature is based upon contradictions, on polarities between the impulse for good and something else. In a democracy, citizens — aided by the checks and balances of our constitutional system — are supposed to manage these polarities in a way that allows us to move forward and live together in peace, with liberty and justice for all. After September 11, when we bore witness to the darker side of human nature, we are again challenged to preserve this democracy with our own hands, heads, and hearts. This is hard work, but we are up to the task. "We must keep a stiff upper lip, and we must go forward with our lives," says Lucile Belen, referring to our civic duty, but also advice she has lived by her entire life.

But what role should government play? "I don't think government should take care of you from the cradle to the grave, I really don't," she replies. "I think you've got to do something on your own in that period of time."

What about God? "I believe in God as the Supreme Being," she says. "I think so often when I look at a flower, which is what I work with, I wonder how anyone can look at a flower and think that there isn't a Supreme Being."

She is optimistic because she believes in the character of her community, of *our* community, just as she always has. And isn't this what politics is really all about, about the way in which we make sense of our condition, the stories we have to tell about ourselves and each other, our interpretations of what is important, of what kind of world we want to live in, and what we are going to do about it?

In February 2002, Lucile Belen gave a presentation on John Adams to her women's club and told me how much she enjoyed reading about him and Abigail in preparation for her talk. In addition to David McCullough's *John Adams*, she had read Joseph Ellis's *Founding Brothers*, along with other materials referred to her by friends. She reveled in the historical knowledge by the stories of patriots from another time. There is something lovely about the image of this eighty-nine-year-old stateswoman delivering a lecture about another countryman and woman who had also devoted their lives to public service. Something symmetrical, an extension of the story of self-government, of *citizenship*, emblematic of an ongoing narrative of hope and optimism, complicated by our multiple loyalties and the tensions they

bring, yet proudly exhibited by those who, propelled by conviction and faith, strive to make sense of our condition and improve it.

At the end of his biography, McCullough describes Adams thus: “His confidence in the future of the country he had served so long and dutifully was, in the final years of his life, greater than ever.”³⁹

I think he could well have been speaking about Lucile Belen too. ❀

There are many who gave generously of their time to help me prepare this article, most especially Lucile Belen, whose friendship is a source of great inspiration and joy. I also would like to thank those of her Lansing friends who provided me with further glimpses into her contributions and character, including Sandy Draggoo, Mark Latterman, Terry McKane, Ed McCree, Emerson Ohl, Pattie Reynolds, Eleanor Smith, and Sid Worthington. Audrey Megquier did her usually superb job transcribing the tapes, and Gerry Morse was the essence of patience and professionalism in helping to make the manuscript better. This article is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Max and Patty Murningham, without whom my pragmatic idealism, such as it is, would not be possible. May they rest in peace.

Notes

1. Interview with Lucile Belen, October 30, 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. While in the wake of September 11 many of his findings may prove to be out-dated, Robert Putnam’s work has greatly influenced public discussion of voluntarism and service, including the Bush administration’s push for “faith-based” community programs. Putnam is a noted Harvard professor of public policy whose *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* analyzes the fragmentation of social ties and its effect on civic engagement. While there is controversy surrounding both his method and his conclusions, the impact of Putnam’s work cannot be denied. A few years ago, he organized the Saguaro Seminar, a diverse group of thinkers and doers from around the country who share a deep commitment to “improving the infrastructure of national civic life.” In December 2000 the Saguaro Seminar, which is based at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, issued the results of its survey on American civic engagement. The Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, conducted in concert with nearly three dozen community foundations, found that levels of civic engagement — how much residents trusted each other, socialized together, participated in organized and “protest” politics, were members of nonprofit organizations and groups, engaged in volunteer work and philanthropy, participated in faith-based initiatives, and so forth — were primary determinants in the quality of public education, community health and happiness, the responsiveness of democratic institutions, the safety of our streets, and economic development. Information about the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (purportedly the largest scientific investigation of civic engagement ever conducted in the United States) can be obtained by visiting its web site at <http://www.cfsv.org/communitysurvey>. A companion report and Saguaro initiative, *Better Together*, can be viewed by visiting <http://www.bettertogether.org/>. General information about the Saguaro Seminar can be obtained by going to <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/index.html>. See also Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

5. Robert Putnam, "A Better Society in a Time of War," *New York Times*, October 19, 2001. Putnam goes on to say that an earlier era of cooperation between government and civil society may be poised for a comeback. Sixty years ago, victory gardens, the presence of Boy Scouts at gasoline stations "collecting floor mats for scrap rubber," the issuance of small-denomination war bonds, the willingness to give hitchhiking soldiers and war workers a lift were all small signs — there were thousands more — of a collective sense of community obligation in the face of war. "Even 60 years ago civic involvement took hold and flourished only with government support. It was not all spontaneous. This is both instructive and reassuring; instructive because it shows that the most selfless civic duties cannot be performed without government help, reassuring because it shows us a path toward a more civil society. President Bush's recent call to America's children and teenagers to wash cars or rake yards to earn money to benefit the children of Afghanistan was well intentioned. But government can do more. It should urge America's religious congregations to plan interfaith services over Thanksgiving weekend. It should also expand national service programs like AmeriCorps. And just as those Boy Scouts at filling stations learned firsthand the value of civic life, this new period of crisis can make real to us and our children the value of deeper community connections."
6. Currently affiliated with the Tufts University College of Citizenship and Public Service, Brian O'Connell has chronicled the evolution of the American tradition of philanthropy long before it became fashionable. In *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, he is candid about the changing face of civic culture, and the erosion of community ties. Yet he remains convinced that America's voluntary spirit is intact and its future of democracy is bright. See Brian O'Connell, *Civil Society: The Underpinnings of American Democracy*, Civil Society Series (Medford, Mass.: Tufts University Press, 1999). See also Brian O'Connell, *America's Voluntary Spirit: A Book of Readings* (New York: Foundation Center, 1983).
7. Wolfe and his research team relied upon the results of a public opinion poll (designed in cooperation with *The New York Times Magazine*) and a series of in-depth interviews conducted with people chosen from eight distinct communities from around the country. Animating the effort was a worry, shared by other notable public intellectuals such as Michael Sandel, Stanley Hoffmann, Benjamin Barber, and others, that American self-determinism has evolved into an unattractive form of self-indulgence and laxity that, in the new international dispensation, can very well sow the seeds of our own demise — not to mention feed hostilities abroad.

But Wolfe discovered something more inspiring. Alluding to philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, he writes, "Just because Americans may be living after virtue does not mean that they are living before vice. Both conservatives distressed by the moral condition of contemporary America and those liberals, feminists, and gay rights activists who find America more tolerant see a direct link between the 1960s and now," he notes.

When Americans think of the kind of moral anarchy and irresponsibility that conservatives associate with the excesses of the 1960s, they do not think about their own lives but about the models held up by the media, the free-agent manipulation of celebrities and sports figures, the self-regarding actions of corporations, and the dishonesty exhibited by politicians. Americans do not think of themselves as escaping from society's obligations as much as they feel that society's institutions have escaped from them.

He continues throughout the book to describe the ways in which respondents talked about their lives, the authoritative sources they draw upon in deciding how best to live. These range from popular television programs and self-help books to

Jesus Christ; philosophers “from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and William James; novelists, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn; theologians, including Teilhard de Chardin and the Rabbi Hillel; historical figures from Winston Churchill to Dorothy Day; and films ranging the gamut from *Saving Private Ryan* to *The Thin Blue Line*.”

Some of them sought pastoral guidance from ministers, priests, and rabbis, while others relied on counselors and therapists. Many appreciated the wisdom of their elders and told of being inspired by great teachers. But for nearly all of them, when a moral decision has to be made, they look into themselves – at their own interests, desires, needs, sensibilities, identities, and inclinations – before they choose the right course of action.

Americans have become comfortable with the idea of moral freedom because its optimistic theory of human nature makes more sense to them than the one it replaced.

Ultimately, the picture Wolfe paints holds promise for the future, suggesting that the stage is set for Americans to turn their attention to those institutions which play a prominent role in American – and global – public life. Our notion of moral freedom corresponds to a deeply held populist suspicion of authority and a corresponding belief that people know their own best interest.

Historically, populist impulses expressed themselves in politics; Americans distrusted elites, especially those whose power speared to rest on breeding and connections, in favor of appeals to the common man. Now that same populist sensibility extends to all kinds of institutions. . . .

“In an age of moral freedom, moral authority has to justify its claims to special insight.”

Wolfe is speaking specifically here of religious institutions and the inclination of Americans to “play a role in creating the morality by which they will be guided.” You could call this the “glass is half full” political philosophy, which contributes to the formative project of democratic civil society because it breeds a kind of can-do confidence in shaping the future, rather than submitting to forces beyond one’s control. This is a brand of moral entrepreneurialism that is grounded in faith and hope and awaits mobilization toward the global challenges of our time.

“Americans would rather assume that human beings are born good, thereby giving them a standard to which they can aspire,” Wolfe writes. “Their common moral philosophy inoculates Americans against those who preach to them that they ought to live in some other way than they do.”

Leftists learned this lesson when they failed to convince Americans to stop their love affair with capitalism, only to discover that Americans like the economic freedom capitalism promises. Conservatives are now learning this lesson as they fail to persuade Americans to return to the norms, traditions, beliefs, and practices of yesterday, for they are discovering the reluctance of Americans to give up the moral freedom they are acquiring. There is a moral majority in America. It just happens to be one that wants to make up its own mind.” Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Freedom in a World of Choice* (New York: Norton, 2001), 196–197.

8. Louis Menand, “Pragmatism and War,” a public lecture at Harvard University on December 6, 2001. While primarily concentrating on dimensions of his praisewor-

thy book, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), Menand, a highly regarded writer and public intellectual, shared some of his observations about American culture after the terrorists' attack. "The U.S. seemed to turn a page," he said, perhaps ushering in a new era where "pragmatism" is giving way to something else.

9. Resolution of the Committee of the Whole, Lansing City Council, October 2001.
10. "Lucile E. Belen" summary biography in the program book for the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame Eighteenth Annual Awards Dinner, October 25, 2001. The program book is swollen with congratulatory messages for Miss Belen, reportedly a record in Hall of Fame history. Among the vast array of display ads — placed by numerous organizations, including the Lansing City Council, the Lansing Fire Department, the Lansing Police Department, the Lansing Economic Development Corporation, the State Board of Education, the East Lansing City Council, the Capital Area Transportation Authority, the Ingham County Sheriff's Office, Sparrow Health System, the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission, the Arts Council, the Athena Foundation, the Michigan Floral Association, the Capital Region Community Foundation, the Mayflower Congregational Church, and a host of others — are from the "fans in the local Belen Millinery Society" (this, in homage to her ever-present chapeau), and the Ohl family (rimmed with a border of thirty-three complimentary nouns and adjectives, such as mentor, humanitarian, voice of the people, astute, sagacious, and puissant. Missing from the list, and one of my favorite words to describe her, is *funny*. Her sense of humor is priceless.)
11. Creamer and Wood comments appeared in Christine MacDonald, "Eight Women Named to Hall of Fame," *Lansing State Journal*, October 26, 2001.
12. Interview with Lucile Belen, July 28, 2000. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in this section are drawn from this interview.
13. "The Sun Is Still Shining," a publication of Ingham Medical Center, Lansing, Michigan, no date.
14. Belen interview.
15. Interview with Edward McCree, October 27, 2000.
16. "The Sun Is Still Shining."
17. McCree interview.
18. Interview with Sandy Draggoo, November 1, 2000.
19. "The Sun Is Still Shining."
20. Interview with Lucile Belen, July 29, 2000. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in this section are drawn from this interview.
21. Interview with Lucile Belen, July 30, 2000. Wilbur Brucker served as attorney general of Michigan, 1929–1931, governor, 1931–1932, general counsel to the Department of Defense during the Army-McCarthy hearings, 1954–1955, and secretary of the army, 1955–1961.
22. Interview with Lucile Belen, July 31, 2000.
23. Ibid.
24. Belen interview, July 29.
25. Frank D. Fitzgerald served as Michigan's secretary of state from 1931 to 1935 and as governor in 1935–1936 and 1939.
26. The National Youth Administration was organized in 1935 as part of the New Deal; located in the Works Progress Administration, it was an attempt to provide work to unemployed young people. As World War Two neared, its emphasis shifted to job training for war work; by late 1943, the National Youth Administration ceased operation.
27. Belen interview, July 30.
28. Interview with Lucile Belen, August 1, 2000.
29. Interview with Lucile Belen, August 6, 2000.
30. McCree interview.
31. Draggoo interview.
32. Television cameras began broadcasting the public comment portion of City Council proceedings in the mid-1970s, a move that brought increased transparency and accountability to council deliberations — as well as providing a platform for

personal attacks and public posturing. In January 2002, the City Council considered proposals to eliminate or modify these broadcasts so as to reduce the level of grandstanding and other forms of abuse. It eventually decided to limit public comments to agenda items, but residents' opposition to the changes caused the matter to be tabled for six months, pending further review. Katie Matvias, "Council to Decide on TR Comment," *Lansing State Journal*, January 14, 2002; Christine MacDonald, "City Will Limit Public Remarks Amid Residents' Protests," *Lansing State Journal*, January 15, 2002.

33. Interview with Terry McKane, November 1, 2000.
34. Interview with Sid Worthington, October 30, 2000.
35. Correspondence from Mark Latterman to Murningham, October 30, 2000.
36. Interview with Mark Latterman, October 27, 2000; Latterman correspondence.
37. Interview with Emerson Ohl, November 1, 2000.
38. McCree interview.
39. David G. McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 651.

