

# **BARBARA McILVAINE SMITH**

## **VICTORIOUS WOMAN OF THE MONTH**

### **SEPTEMBER 2008**

*BE HERE NOW*



Be Here Now means living in the present moment. Easy to say, not so easy to do. Yet it's the only way Barbara McIlvaine Smith was able to pursue her passion through devastating loss.

In January 2007, when Barbara McIlvaine Smith was sworn into the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, it was mere weeks after learning that her spouse, Bob Smith, had cancer. A few days later, while Barb was at the PA state capitol for her official orientation, Bob was having surgery in a Philadelphia hospital. Though Barb's heart was in Philadelphia, she had little choice but to be at her new job – three hours away. It was the kind of agonizing choice many women in business have to make, every day, about their spouses, their children, even their aging parents. It was a political challenge she never anticipated. It was a personal challenge that was thirty-five years in the making.

It was the late 1960's when feisty Barbara McIlvaine started college. Affected by the social climate and political unrest of her generation, she dropped out because she "didn't have a true purpose for being there." She met and married Bob Smith in the early 1970's and, as Barb describes it, the relationship was a special one, "a partnership from the beginning." The couple had three children. Their third child, a girl, had special needs. Though doctors recommended that they "put her in an institution," the couple refused. Throughout her short life, Barb and Bob cared for her while raising their two older children. Her daughter's death at age four prompted Barb to go back to college. This time she had a purpose. She wanted to be a teacher.

Barb McIlvaine Smith graduated in 1995, summa cum laude. She started teaching, and even created a program honoring her Native American heritage. But, like many Baby Boomer Women, her resume reflects feminism, change and personal growth. In addition to teaching, Barb was also an administrative assistant at an art institute, worked in a family owned and operated business, was a committee chair in local government and served as the borough council Vice President as well as numerous other committees and boards of directors.

When Barb decided to run for political office, she counted on Bob's support during the campaign. He was there for her and was as devastated as she was when it ended in a hard loss. He wanted her to try again but Barb refused. Though she believed she could do a great job and wanted to serve, she disliked the roughness of political campaigning. So instead of politics, Barb put her energies into several major initiatives for local organizations.

All the while an itch kept niggling Barbara McIlvaine Smith's brain and it wasn't getting scratched. Like so many women who want to lead meaningful lives, she experienced the anxiousness that results from not fulfilling one's purpose and knowing that peace won't come until that purpose is served. Over and over again, she asked herself, "What am I going to do next?" When the answer wouldn't come, she felt depressed and isolated. She was still active, but just not engaged in a way that satisfied her soul.

Then, in July 2005, the Pennsylvania Congress did something that shook Barbara to her very core. It happened in the middle of a hot night when the Congress voted themselves a raise. The news hit the papers the next day, and when Barb heard about it, she was infuriated. Budgets, like library funding, had been cut and the state's finances were already stretched to the limits. The anger she felt about the way the citizens of Pennsylvania were treated found its way into nearly every one of her conversations. When it spewed into a discussion with a colleague, he told her "instead of getting angry, *do something.*"

Though she agreed with him, and wanted to act, she held back. That is, until the day Barb got the phone call that changed everything. The long-time incumbent, to whom she lost her first election, was retiring. In practically a split second, Barbara McIlvaine Smith decided to "Be Here Now" and seized the moment. Discussing it with Bob, he applauded her decision with an, "I'll be there for you." He also admitted that he didn't think he could give her the same time and energy as he previously did. Barb

accepted his decision and, in whatever way he gave it, was glad for his support. She felt fully alive as she made her bid for the soon-to-be-vacated House seat.

Not long after, on a crisp fall Sunday afternoon, Barb and Bob were out door-to-door campaigning when Bob complained of leg pain. They only got to six houses that day. Barb insisted Bob see a doctor. Bob resisted. The next time they knocked on doors, they had to stop after just two houses. As the campaign progressed, Bob had physical therapy, but he got worse.

In November '06, Barbara McIlvaine Smith won her election by only twenty-three votes. Her opponent contested. There was a recount. At the same time, Bob's leg pain was becoming increasingly worse and he was seeing doctors and having tests. A few weeks later, Barb was certified as the election's winner. The next day, Bob's hip broke from the cancer that was spreading through his bones.

In January, after her swearing-in ceremony, Barb split her time between the district office and the state capitol. She learned the ins and outs of her new position as she figured out how to best serve her constituents. On the homefront, however, she knew her spouse of thirty-five years – her partner and the person with whom she most wanted to share her victory – was dying.

The first half of '07 tested Barbara McIlvaine Smith to the nth degree. Bob went from hospital to nursing home, and finally to hospice care at home. Bob passed away in May 2007. Barb's political success was "a bittersweet victory," she admits, her words punctuated by the strain on her face. "It was so hard. I was in desperate pain. There were times when I'd be sitting on the floor of the House waiting for a vote and the tears would just flow." It was a hard, hard time.

In the year since Bob's death, Barb learned what every widow before her has known: "You have to carry on," she says, "your heart *is* going to pull you but *you* have to get through it." She stayed motivated by her desire to do her job well for the people she serves. Also, politics being what it is, she was fully aware that her opposition would use her personal situation in the next election. So, she stayed on guard.

Barbara McIlvaine Smith struggled through birthdays and holidays. She said the only real way she made it through was "to stay focused on the present moment." Whenever she was distracted, Barb centered her thinking and her heart and found solace by repeating the words from the book that Bob bought her early in their relationship, "Be Here Now."

Just after New Year '08, Barb says she had a turning point. "I know how much Bob wanted me to be here. So, I decided to choose happiness. I decided to choose joy." She wants women to know, "You *do* have a choice. Sometimes those choices are hard to make. The role of the victim is easy to take on." Still, Barb insists, a woman can choose her own victory path.

These days, she's getting more used to coming home, finding no one there and "learning to be single" again. She's enjoying her children and granddaughter and is fully engaged in her work. "I'm really aware of how things work in state government," she affirms, which puts her in an excellent position to make positive changes in her state and for her constituents.

What Barb most wants women to know is, whatever difficulties and changes they are experiencing, there is more for them when they make the choice to be happy and fulfill their purpose. She wants us to remember, "We women are strong, we are focused," and she wants us to use our strength and focus to our best advantage.

***Barb, through your own loss, you've modeled a victory  
born of courage through change, strength through heartbreak,  
and a purposeful focus on doing what's right.  
Thanks for showing the way!***

Representative Barbara McIlvaine Smith's reelection campaign is in full swing. You can learn more about her accomplishments and her campaign at <http://www.pahouse.com/bsmith> and <http://www.smith156.org>.