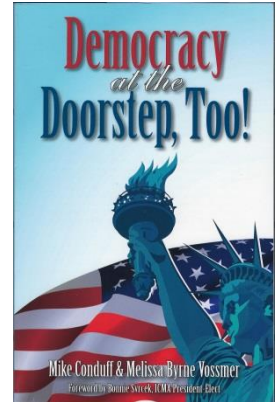


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An Honorable Call

As a little girl, I sat at the dinner table with my sister and three brothers, hearing my parents debate who had more power—the County Sheriff or the Chief of Police. My father worked as a police officer and my mother as a deputy sheriff. My desire to serve the public began in a home environment where local government service was as common as meat and potatoes.

My father gave his life for public service, suffering a brain aneurysm while transporting a prisoner. He died at the age of 48. What I remember most about his sense of duty was how fully he gave himself to his community, without fear for his own life. While his death was not at the hand of another, his department deemed it job-related. At his funeral, I heard amazing stories of how he went above duty and helped turn around drug abusers and youth, traveling down the wrong path.

Thanks to my father's help in obtaining my first job at the age of 15, I worked as a Library Page, repairing books. That launched my local government career, taking me to eleven cities and one Indian Nation. My path included police cadet, secretary, purchasing agent, administrative analyst, assistant city manager, tribal government manager, and city manager.

I kept my family name until I married and divorced within a short time. The divorce had nothing to do with my work but my ex-spouse's infidelity caused me to ponder why I had abandoned my family name. I reclaimed my maiden name. Reconnecting with my father's memory led me to promise never again to abandon his name.

My first city manager position was with a two-square mile coastal community in California. My six-year old son and I felt at home with a City Council made up primarily of grandfatherly types. It was in this town that I met the man of my dreams. Within 60 days of meeting him, I became the wife of William G. Graft.

One of my council members, bothered by my last-minute wedding announcement and short engagement expressed concern that I should not marry. His reason?

“We can't have *Graft* in city hall. We'll be the laughing stock of the county.”

I assured him it would be okay, as I intended to keep my



William and I are celebrating
our 20th anniversary this year

maiden name and hyphenate with Graft. His objection dissolved. My Council embraced my new husband. If only the IRS would have embraced him. . . .

After filing our first joint tax return, William entertained a visit from the IRS. The IRS accused him of taking the identity of a dead man—William G. Culbreth—my deceased father. It did not take long for the explanation to exonerate him. The IRS recanted the accusation, apologizing that rarely did they see the breadwinner of a family being the woman much less keeping any part of her maiden name, and marrying a man with the same first name and middle initial as her father.

Two cities later, I took the number two position with the City of San Diego. The newspaper announced, “Graft comes to City Hall.” My mother-in-law wrote a scathing letter to the editor, decrying the attack on her son’s honorable family name.

“He’s from a proud heritage of Grafts—a strong German name.” I was still new to the family and had never counseled her on the dangers of responding to the press from a defensive position. The press never spoke of it again.

Four years later, a Southern California Indian Tribe invited me to serve as its Tribal



Tribal Hall

Government Manager. “We want you to create for us a democratic form of government from scratch,” the Tribal Council said. It took just a couple of weeks of introducing me as Dr. Penelope Culbreth-Graft before the Tribal Chairman asked me, “Why do you hyphenate with your maiden name when your married name is so beautiful?”

“What do you mean? That would leave me with Graft . . . in government,” I said.

“Graft is a wonderful blending of two trees of life to make a stronger, more resilient growth.”

From that day forward, we agreed the Tribe would call me Penny Graft, exchanging ten letters for the tongue-twisting 23 letters.

Some 32 years after I began my public service career, my only child has taken up the mantle of public service. Working for his second city, Michael bears his father’s name but his mother’s love for serving communities. When in junior high, he told me he was glad he had a different name because his science teacher read a news article to the class that quoted his mother on the impact of El Nino on the town. “It would have been so embarrassing if they knew I was your son.” Now, he tells me, “How could I want to be anything other than a city manager when that is what we know and love to do?”

I am grateful for my parents’ public service and am proud of my son’s career choice. What I have learned over the years is that a name is only a name and what they call you is not as important what you are called to do. The call to public service by any name is called *‘honorable.’*