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It's in Their DNA...

Laurie Burns McRobbie arrived in Bloomington in July 2005 and immediately set out to learn everything she could about her new home and to begin contributing to the community.

She was about to marry the future president of Indiana University, Michael A. McRobbie, but community engagement was already in “the family DNA,” as she likes to say. People told her she needed to meet the über-involved Charlotte Zietlow, and she got her opportunity when Charlotte talked about her life and the involvement of women in local politics at a Bloomington Rotary Club program during Women’s History Month in March 2006.

“As I listened to her talk, I thought, this sounds just like my mother,” Laurie remembers. “I went up to meet her afterward, knowing this was the famous Charlotte I was supposed to meet. I introduced myself as Laurie Burns. I had not taken Michael’s name yet. I said ‘I hope I don’t offend you, but I have to tell you that you remind me of my mother.’ And she said, ‘Oh, you’re Eunice Burns’ daughter.’ My jaw just dropped. I was speechless.”

The reference to her mother would not have surprised Laurie had it been made in Ann Arbor, Michigan. But in Bloomington? “This is a running joke in my family — I have three siblings. I called my mom and said, ‘Mom, once again, I can’t go anywhere without running into someone who knows you.’”

As explained in our feature story on page 107, Charlotte’s first foray into politics was campaigning in Ann Arbor to support the presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy in 1960. In the months before the 1962 election, Charlotte was knocking on doors to support candidates for local offices, which included Eunice Burns, who, like Charlotte nearly a decade later, became a pioneering City Council member in her city.

“Funny how these things happen,” Charlotte says. “Eunice Burns was an inspiration to me.”

And to many, many others.

A 2013 story published by *State & Hill*, the magazine of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the

University of Michigan, exults in a headline, “Yes You! The unlikely and absolutely inspiring career of Eunice Burns” and goes on to describe her rich life of public service, from three terms on the City Council to unsuccessful mayoral candidate to decades of fighting for clean water as a board member of the Huron River Watershed Council.

“The issue that galvanized her at the beginning was fair housing,” Laurie says. Eunice railed against the practice of redlining by real estate agents who steered whites to white neighborhoods and blacks to black neighborhoods. Although she had already entered public life with her 1962 election to City Council, Eunice’s involvement in community affairs continued unabated after the untimely death of her husband (Laurie’s father), University of Michigan Professor of Public Health Charles Burns, in a 1965 sail boating accident.

Laurie sees a parallel between her mother, who has a master’s degree in public administration, and Charlotte, who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics. “When Charlotte and (her husband) Paul moved to Bloomington, IU was like a lot of institutions. They were not hiring women as faculty members, so you had a lot of women with advanced degrees who were not employed as faculty as they would be now. There was an enormous amount of highly educated women with the time to invest in their communities.”

Through Laurie, Eunice, 91, and Charlotte, 80, have established a friendship, and Eunice came to Bloomington a few years ago to participate in Charlotte’s 75th birthday celebration. For Laurie and Charlotte, it’s an even closer bond. “I have bestowed on Charlotte the title of being my Bloomington mother,” Laurie says.

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