

BETTY DODSON

'A Classy Lady'

by Lenore Harris Hughes
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Elizabeth Jane Farmer "Betty" Dodson, a tireless champion of El Paso's disadvantaged young people, died March 19. She was 77.

"In our time, we would call Betty a classy lady," said Dr. Will Cotton of Trinity-First United Methodist Church.

For decades, she lobbied El Paso schools, businesses and government for programs to help teenagers facing an otherwise bleak future. Her most recent achievement is Project Redirection which combined the YWCA and the three largest school districts to provide volunteer mentors for teenage mothers. She is credited with helping 4,000 young women to become self-sufficient.

Betty was born Feb. 4, 1920. Graduating from high school in 1939, she entered the University of South Dakota where she was chosen First Place Beauty. During World War II, she worked at the Air Force Technical Training Command in Sioux Falls, S.D. There she met Lee "Tex" Dodson, another civilian employee.

During a class Lee was teaching, a co-worker "whispered, 'Tex, come here. Do you see that girl in the second row? You ought to marry her.' And I did, but it took several months to convince her." He joined the Navy, and they were married in 1942. He was discharged Christmas 1945.

During the next ten years they lived in Cleburne, San Angelo, and Van Horn, Texas, before moving to El Paso in 1957, when Lee became principal at Eastwood High School.

Betty began teaching fourth grade at Putnam school in 1965, then moved to Morehead Junior High School and finally to Coronado High. She was asked by the El Paso school district to begin a pilot program for teaching teenage parents.



She wrote a proposal to the Ford Foundation for Project Redirection. El Paso was one of three sites chosen nationally for a school-based program. She was the program's administrator until signing on with the YWCA.

Project Redirection was 3 years old when Ellie Fenton became volunteer chair in 1987. "Betty was really special," recalled Ellie Fenton. 'She was a wonderful listener - a quiet person who did what had to be done even when she had to swim against the current. She continued throughout her life to

inspire and encourage young girls faced with unexpected pregnancies.”

The Soroptimist Club International of El Paso honored Betty as a Woman of Distinction in 1988. Sharon Jiles, president at the time, said, “The club will remember Betty for the tears she shed and the hours she spent helping women who found themselves in situations where they could not help themselves.”

Betty was named Woman of the Year in Education for 1985 by the El Paso Woman's Political Caucus. And in 1986, the El Paso Council of Beta Sigma Phi named Betty 'First lady of El Paso.' In 1987 Betty was inducted into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame by the YWCA.

“Betty received many honors because she was such a creative, caring person,” said Myrna Deckert executive director of YWCA. “Her whole objective was to redirect the lives of teenagers and keep them in school. She believed education was one of the most important considerations.”

Betty is survived by her husband of 53 years, Lee Dodson; children Susan, Jane, John, and William, brothers George Farmer and John Farmer, and five grandchildren.

“One word describes my memory of Betty,” Lee said. “That word is unforgettable.”

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