

Elaine Kearnes fondly

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

When the comely Elaine Kearnes announced near the end of 1982 Idaho Legislature in late March she would step down after serving six two-year terms, it signaled the end of one of the most compassionate legislative voices in behalf of the needy, handicapped, elderly and others generally grouped among the downtrodden masses.

Two contestants, Democrat Anne Voilleque, well-known civic activist, and Republican J. F. "Chad" Chadband, prominent Idaho Falls businessman, seek to replace her but even they admit it will be difficult to fill the shoes "of that fine lady from Idaho Falls," as she is warmly known among her colleagues.

Mrs. Kearnes has been handed a number of awards for her sterling public services and likely will receive many more as her term winds down Nov. 30 but she plans to continue to be active in the many commissions and committees of which she is a member.

Mrs. Kearnes said as chairman of the House Health and Welfare Committee, her legislative duties almost became a fulltime all-around job, not just the 70-80 days the Legislature annually is in session.

"I have such an empathy for people," she said in a Post-Register interview. "I have so much feelings for the things that are happening in the world I decided that healthwise it was too hard not to be able to solve some of the problems. I really have a love for people. If I have a hobby it is people."

This may be true personally but perhaps her greatest sport passion is golf, adding "I also want to play a little golf, do a few things I haven't done because I wasn't getting any younger."

Mrs. Kearnes, who spends as much time as possible on the golf course, described herself as a mediocre player but she admits she has won a number of trophies and prizes, although no major golf tournaments. She was elected president in 1972 of the Idaho Falls Country Club Women.

"It was a hard decision for me to make," she said regarding her coming withdrawal from the Legislature. "I just love being involved with people."

Then with a slight tremor in her voice she mused "I think one of the things I will miss most is walking to the State Capitol each morning to attend legislative sessions. I then see the Idaho and American flags waving over the Capitol. I always get a lump in my throat over this."

In her 12 years, Mrs. Kearnes has been deeply involved in many legislative bills and political maneuvers and she said it is difficult to pick any favorites except that she looks with deep satisfaction in helping enact so many people's programs.

Mrs. Kearnes is listed as a Republican and is generally classed by the political writers as a moderate. She says that's probably because she is independent in the way she votes for bills, mostly on merits and not because of partisan overtones.

She recalled in the 1975 session when she was in leadership as the Republican House caucus chairman, she vigorously fought and won \$10 million in highway funding which she felt was badly needed to upgrade Idaho highways.

"It was very exciting and fun to be able to have that much influence," she said.

She also remembered that in 1981 when the Senate arrogantly adjourned without consent of the House, it was forced to come back a week later. They then voted for an amendment to her bill that appropriated additional funding for the Child Development Centers and

Sun, Aug 8, 1982

some services for the mentally ill and Aid to Dependent Children.

"Over the years," she said, "I believe I was instrumental in inaugurating and funding such programs as alcoholic rehabilitation, development disability, dependent children, mental health and many others."

In this last session she helped successfully sponsor the catastrophic fund legislation to aid counties in paying for indigent medical care cases and for domestic women services.

She said she was not sold at first on the Domestic Violence Women Bill, more commonly known as Battered Women Bill, but after hearing the debate and arguments, she became a solid supporter. She then jumped in to carry the bill on the House floor and much to her surprise it passed by decisive margins in both the Senate and House.

"I was appalled to hear battered women was one of the most widely unreported crimes in the nation," she said. "I also was moved by the fact that so many volunteers spent hours and their own money to provide shelters for these beaten women and their children."

"You know," she said, "testimony even showed there are more cases involving battered husbands than one would suspect."

The bill raises the marriage license fees from \$10 to \$25 and will generate some \$200,000 yearly to maintain shelter homes for the battered women.

Considering that nearly 90 percent of teenage marriages and nearly 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce, she said it is only fitting that such a program be carried out.

She said one of her keenest disappointments in the last session was the voting down of a bill for updating the Bureau of Vital Statistics which is months behind in issuing marriage, birth and other such certificates.

Mrs. Kearnes entered the political arena without planning when one of the most astute legislators, Rep. Aden Hyde, was recalled in a special election in 1970 because he voted to raise legislative pay. He and Sen. Fisher Ellsworth, R-Idaho Falls, were voted out of office in a light vote turnout and it was ironical they were the only two recalled of the 76 legislators of 105 who voted likewise.

Democrat Gov. Cecil D. Andrus appointed her to replace Hyde and Mrs. Kearnes remarked "it was a hard act to follow" in trying to emulate Hyde's legislative achievements.

Mrs. Kearnes has been office manager for Hammond Music Co. 24 years and plans to continue in that capacity.

A native of Idaho Falls, she graduated from Idaho Falls High School and has made her home here all of her life.

She was married to a well-known sheepman, Jay Kearnes. He died in 1977. She has a son, Bill Ashton, from a previous marriage, a mechanic at EG&G, and a daughter, Monette Reynolds, whose husband, Roy, is with the EG&G graphic department and a well-known artist.

Her father, Walter David, died in 1976 but her mother, Emily, continues to live in Idaho Falls.

Mrs. Kearnes lives at 304 Gustafson and her children, six grandsons and one great-grandson visit her frequently.

Remarking on her philosophy, she said "I really enjoy life. To me, every day is beautiful. This is a big beautiful world, filled with a lots of real wonderful people."

Among her most cherished honors was an engraved bronze necklace she was given by a national organization under Phyllis Schafley for being the most pro-family legislator in Idaho.