

Rogero's election a milestone for DeSelm

By Betty Bean

About the time that Mark Padgett called Madeline Rogero to concede the election, Bee DeSelm was rolling her walker up the ramp into the Foundry to join the victory celebration.

Inside, the first woman ever elected mayor of Knoxville was watching for her former Knox County Commission colleague, whom she considers her mentor and inspiration.

"I called her in 1990 when I was running for County Commission and said 'Hey, can I come get some advice?' I asked how much time it took to be a county commissioner and she pulled out her appointment book and showed me details that you need to know when you are thinking about running for political office," Rogero said. "She was a great role model, an advisor and somebody who always studied the issues and didn't look out in the crowd to see who was sitting there to determine which way she was going to vote. She studied the issues and did what she thought was right."

Republican DeSelm and Democrat Rogero served together for eight years, often teaming up on matters of conscience. In 1994, a term limits referendum passed with a broad majority, and although it didn't go into effect until 2002 (and wasn't enforced until a court order in 2007), both DeSelm and Rogero – unlike most of their colleagues – voluntarily honored the voters' mandate. DeSelm had served 22 years, Rogero eight.

Rogero's election has been a point of light in an otherwise grim year for DeSelm – in July, she lost her husband, Hal, after 63 years of marriage. She fell and broke her hip in August and moved into an assisted living center to recuperate for a month and never returned home. And there's something else, too.

"I've got Alzheimer's, which is a big problem for me, but not so much that I can't usually carry on a conversation," she said. "At my age, most everybody has some symptoms like I have. I told the people at assisted living that I may be back to see them in a year or two."

But for now, she's settling into an apartment in a retirement center and sorting through a lifetime's worth of memories. She has donated her commission papers to the Baker Center and done a little campaigning.

"Madeline took what I gave her and ran with it. ... I knew she just had what it took and that something good was going happen. She came by to see me in assisted living and we went through my wing and talked to anybody who was willing. And of course, I'd been wearing her shirt for quite a while."