

How did Mormon women survive crossing the Plains? Pickleball anyone?

With kids in tow, today's LDS women are 'serving' and spending time in the "kitchen" — but this is a whole new game, a whole new kind of feminism.

You probably know pickleball is sweeping the nation. Did you also know it's ushering in the third wave of Latter-day Saint feminism?

It all started last winter when my neighbor invited me to play pickleball at the church meetinghouse. I asked her when, thinking this was some one-off social event, until she said, "Every morning at 6 and 9."

I had played pickleball, of course, enough to be terrible and also obsessed. But nothing could have prepared me for the cult I was about to join.

I showed up at the church gym (forgive me, cultural hall) to find seven other women and their 10 collective children who aren't yet in school. Some got to work setting up the nets, a few climbed up to the stage to skillfully jimmy-rig a "slide" using two plastic folding tables that had been left out for this purpose. Someone plugged in a phone to a speaker and started playing hits from the early 2000s — think Black Eyed Peas, Fergie, Usher and more Usher, songs that instantly made my blood pressure rise as they are reminiscent of so many angry BYU dance parties. Someone propped open a door to the hallway so we could keep an eye on the kids, who then indulged every urge they have to stifle on Sundays: riding

bikes through the halls, raiding the nursery for toys, watching Cocomelon on full volume.

I greeted the women awkwardly, ready to make whatever small talk was required, but all they asked was my name and whether I wanted to serve first (no please). I whiffed my first ball and sent the next one out into the foyer where it got stuck under the floral couch. And everyone was just like

"great try" and "so close," and I thought: Is this the Celestial Kingdom?

People across the nation are playing pickleball, but no one at the degree of difficulty I am. Jamie plays with her 4-year-old son nearly attached to her hip. He orbits her as she serves, runs to the net when she does. Melissa frequently serves while holding her 6-month-old daughter. "Do you want us to wait?" we ask as Amy's kid parks her princess scooter in the middle of the court.

"No," Amy responds. "If she gets hit, she'll learn."

There is an unquestioned sisterhood at cultural hall pickleball, which I will tell you is not a given in most all-female gatherings. Sometimes a new person joins, and we have to teach her what the "kitchen" is. She is awful, and it's not super fun to play with her for a while, but we are patient and helpful because we love her once. Also because we have so many kids.



The meetinghouse pickleball gang, from left, Ashley DeHart, Becca Preator, Rebbe Brassfield, Amanda Beardreau, Beth McLean, Julie Davidson.

I can't tell you how not mad this feminist movement would make you. One Saturday over the holidays, we showed up to play and were greeted by the stench of man sweat, lo and behold the priesthood was just finishing basketball. One of my now BFFs commented sarcastically, "It's wild none of them brought their kids."

Everyone laughed, and I held my breath, ready to dog-pile about inequality, like many of us recently did on the church's Instagram — ready to rally us all to wear pants.

But no one bit. The women just took their positions on the court and started playing. I have wondered ever since, why do they feel more comfortable than I do in the church? Are they just there to pickle? Are they the well-behaved women Laurel Thatcher Ulrich was talking about, who change the world but seldom make history?

Pickleball at the church reaffirms the deep love, almost patriotism, I have for Latter-day Saint women. Once, my current pickleball partner asked which ward it was in. When I

told her, she said, "Oh! I was a visiting speaker in your ward last Sunday, but you probably don't remember." I squinted at her, mentally adding a dress and mascara, and there she was. Of course I remembered her talk about the need for more love at church. She had praised what she called her "modern family," including her brother and his husband, who she said were two of the most Christlike people she knew. I remember wishing I was friends with her. Turns out, I already am. Pickleball at the church embodies the community we are so, so good at building: the one I watch friends who have left mourn and wonder how to replace, and I wish they didn't have to.

I will not speak for all Latter-day Saint women because I'm not an idiot. For me, it's often tricky to be a woman at church, but never when I'm playing pickleball. At pickleball, I am free. I'm loud and joyful and athletic. I am, as I believe Usher might put it, a lady in the chapel but a freak in the gym. And there are dozens of us. Dozens!

Whenever my mother-in-law used to come into town, she would want to play pickleball. She would lose every game and keep wanting to play. This deeply endeared her to me, given I am a small person who avoids playing anyone better than me and once actually, shamefully, yelled "off you" at my husband when he hit a great shot. For her birthday, one of us gave her a pickleball paddle called "The Duchess." It was purple and frilly and perfect. Six months later, she came to town, Duchess in tow, and schooled us all. "Have you been playing a lot?" I asked her.

She said, without taking her eye off her opponent, "Every morning at the church."

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REBBE BRASSFIELD

ANE GRETHE BALLIF PETERSON » 1932-2024

Remembering a Latter-day Saint feminist, lifelong Democrat and social justice warrior

She left a legacy of activism in many areas, most notably in advocacy for children of abuse.

By PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

The Salt Lake Tribune

Ever the optimist, Ane Grethe Ballif Peterson was born into activism.

So it was natural for the tall, stunning and stately woman of faith with a great laugh and a get-it-done work ethic to take up various causes throughout her life — from editing Exponent II, a magazine for Latter-day Saint women, to sitting on the Young Women general board for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from volunteering at the Junior League of Salt Lake City to co-founding Women Concerned About Nuclear War.

Peterson, who died April 15 at age 92, and whose life and legacy will be celebrated later this week, found a way to balance the many sides of her — wife, mother, feminist, advocate, educator, organizer and even, briefly, a Democratic candidate running against longtime U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch (speaking of optimism).

One such effort stands out: her drive to do something about child abuse.

In 1988, Peterson sat on a jury for a man accused of sexually abusing his two sons. Because of problems with the boys' testimonies (some conflicting details), jurors felt hard to acquit, but Peterson "felt horrible," according to her daughter, Erika Peterson Munson.

She believed the children were afraid of their father and retraumatized by having to testify over and over again amid strangers in



Left » Ane Grethe Ballif Peterson died April 15 at age 92. Right » Grethe is shown with husband Chase Peterson in their Park City home in 1999. He died in 2014.

a courtroom.

"I could not sleep or stop thinking about what we could have done better for these children," Peterson wrote in her memoir.

She met with then Utah Gov. Norm Bangerter, who created the Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and appointed her as chair, according to her obituary. "After three years of research, community education, and private/public partnership, the Children's Justice Center was established with the mission of providing a child-friendly, supportive atmosphere where children could receive coordinated services during the child abuse investigative process."

Currently, there are 26 such centers throughout the Beehive State and every year the organization bestows the Grethe Peterson Children's Justice Award. "If I could make one



Left » Ane Grethe Ballif Peterson died April 15 at age 92. Right » Grethe is shown with husband Chase Peterson in their Park City home in 1999. He died in 2014.

contribution in his life apart from my family," Peterson wrote in her memoir, "this is mine."

No matter how important, that was hardly the leader's only contribution.

PROVO CHILDHOOD AND BOSTON HOME

Peterson, the youngest of the four children of Algie and George Ballif, grew up on Provo's University Avenue, where family, church and public service (her aunt was Esther Peterson, a former U.S. assistant secretary of labor) wove a tapestry of connections into her DNA.

Algie Ballif was a "pillar" of the state's Democratic Party, holding numerous public service positions including Provo school board member, two-time state legislator and president of the Utah Democratic Party. "She saw her mother get things

done in the context of Provo politics, while being friends with the Republican majority," Munson said. Differing opinions were never "a source of conflict for her."

After completing a history degree from Brigham Young University in three years, Grethe Peterson went back East to attend the Radcliffe Management Training program, a graduate degree in business available to women, the obituary said, "when the Harvard Business School was not."

It was in Boston that she met her future husband, Chase Peterson, a Utah boy who was studying medicine at Harvard and eventually would rise to president of the University of Utah.

The family spent many years in Boston, at one time living in philosopher William James' Victorian house and making it the community center for many

Latter-day Saint students living and working in Cambridge.

BACK IN UTAH

The family returned in 1978 to Utah, where Grethe Peterson again took up writing, speaking and organizing.

"She really was an extrovert," Munson said. "Her world was full of people of all different talents, and she would try to get them together to create something new."

Even so, Peterson would tell her children everything she was doing, her daughter said. "We never felt neglected or excluded like we were sacrificing our mother."

Taking care of children, helping them find their way, while caring about national and international issues, Munson said, "felt like it was all in the family."

Peterson wanted, her daughter said, "to have both in her life all the time." Chase Peterson died in 2014, leaving her a widow for a decade. At his death, she was able "to sob with abandon," Peterson wrote in her memoir. "It frightened my children, but it did not frighten me. I was just me, being fully and authentically me."

She concluded the summary of her life with these words: "My dance has been joyful. May yours be as well."

The family is hosting "a celebration of life" for Peterson on Saturday, May 25, at 11 a.m. at the Monument Park Latter-day Saint Stake Center, 1320 Wasatch Drive, Salt Lake City.

In lieu of flowers, the family suggests donations in Peterson's name to — where else? — Salt Lake Friends of the Children's Justice Center.