INTRODUCTION

> "To glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie."
>
> —Paolo Freire[1]

On the main streets of the Oklahoma towns of Elizabeth Warren's forebears, wooden buildings with tall, false fronts tried to make the structures appear larger than they actually were. All it took was a side-angled view to discover the deception. Similarly, through one particular decade of her career as a legal scholar, Warren gradually noticed the emptiness in the promise that the markets of American capitalism held potential prosperity for everyone. Behind that tall claim stood a tale of benefits for all that did not hold true on the Main Street where the 99 percent lived. Warren took a pivot in her life to tell that story and transform it into policy and reform.

My interest in writing about Elizabeth began in 2012 when I watched her televised speech at the Democratic National Convention. As the warm-up to Bill Clinton, she stepped onto the blue stage to thundering applause and chants of *Warren! Warren!* The law professor, for the first time, was running for an elective office, the U.S. Senate seat from Massachusetts. She had staked her claim as a populist, similarly white-knuckled about standing up to the big banks as her favorite president, trust-buster Teddy Roosevelt. That night, she tapped into the post–financial crisis angst with her trademark mantra that rang true for the millions who'd lost their pensions and homes and jobs to a Wall Street free-for-all and felt no one had been held accountable for it: "People feel like the system is rigged against them. And here's the painful part—they're right."[2]

After Warren won her Senate election that year, I started a file that stayed on the corner of my desk for the next few years, crammed with articles and magazines that featured her photo on the cover. By the spring of 2017 she had become a brand-name populist who many thought would have run for president in 2016 and were now eyeing for 2020. My folder had also turned into a bonafide research project, and I was delighted to have a contract to write this book.

I looked forward to meeting people across the country who could give their unique angle of Warren's life as it had crossed theirs. The public sees Elizabeth in front of the camera on cable news, late-night talk shows, and in Senate committee hearings, and in each of those settings she has a message to convey or information to glean

and little time to do it. The people I interviewed who encountered Elizabeth in various passages of her life have a longer view and described her as energetic, open, warm, genuine, unaffected, and kind. Her leadership style, according to those she mentored into law careers or whom worked on her staff, seemed to fit the profile of the female leader—relational, collaborative, and encouraging.

In her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg invited women to reach for more success by acting more like men, leaning in to grab opportunities and negotiate for better salaries. At the same time, however, acting "nice" and "concerned about others" would increase a woman's chances, according to one scholar she mentioned, which put the onus on women to throttle back their authentic selves to serve the biased expectations of men (and some women). That game-playing perpetuates rather than challenges the gender bias embedded in the workplace and in society in general, and Sandberg acknowledged this paradox. Elizabeth Warren is not one to re-engineer her focused communication style or tenaciousness in order to adhere to expectations about what is "appropriate" for fighting for an issue.[3]

Since discovering her mission to put her expertise about the financial hardships of the middle class into practice, Warren has never lost the sense of urgency that first gripped her around the issue. She knew that about herself when she entered the Senate in 2013. "I came knowing that large parts of what I understood about how the Senate worked would never work for me," she told *Time* magazine in 2015.

"I would not have that kind of time, but more importantly, America's middle class did not have that kind of time."[4] For Elizabeth Warren, the clock is always ticking.

Among the surprises that unfolded in Warren's story was the impact her bankruptcy research had on her evolution as a scholar and, as I frame it, a public intellectual who feels compelled to bring her work to the public square. Writing for general audiences instead of limiting her work to law journals was another form of teaching, which had been her goal since grade school. The more her research taught her about people whose financial peril brought them to the bankruptcy courts, the more she peeled away her own assumptions about America's most indebted and down-and-out. Her work changed her to the point that she shifted from a Republican to a card-carrying Democrat.

Another transformational piece of her story goes back to coming of age in the early and mid-1960s. Elizabeth was too young to be influenced and empowered by the feminism that was only beginning to sprout. Instead, like so many of her generation, she struggled with the clash between the Betty Crocker model of ideal female wholeness and her inner spark to get out in the world and try something. I found that struggle just as telling about who Elizabeth Warren is as the tale of her rise from a dusty, financially strapped Oklahoma childhood to academic and political prominence. She had to find her own way through those critical years when her heart was pulled in two directions with equal, searing force. There were no easy answers

or foolproof road maps, only choices to make and the tenacity to work through them.

At about seven o'clock on February 7, 2017, a handful of senators were debating about President Donald Trump's nominee for U.S. attorney general, their colleague Jeff Sessions.[5] It had been a long day amid fevered weeks of arguments by Democrats against Sessions's confirmation, recalling his record of suppressing black votes when he was attorney general in Alabama in the 1980s and '90s.

That evening, Elizabeth Warren stood at the podium dressed in one of her signature buttonless suit jackets, this one blue, with collar slightly up, over a black top and pants. Twenty minutes into her talk, she began to read a letter written in 1986 by Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow, to the Senate Judicial Committee. That year, the committee was deliberating about confirming Jeff Sessions as a federal judge, and Mrs. King's letter expressed her brief but pointed reasons against his confirmation. One sentence stated, "Mr. Sessions has used the awesome power of his office to chill the free exercise of the vote by black citizens."

Republican Senator Steve Daines from Montana, who was presiding as the chair, knocked his gavel three times to stop Warren from speaking. "The Senator is reminded that it is a violation of Rule Nineteen of the standing rules of the Senate to impute to another

senator, or senators," he said, "any conduct or motive unworthy or becoming [sic] a senator" (the rule reads "unbecoming").

The process around Rule Nineteen is two strikes, you're out. First you get a warning, and if your "insults" to a fellow senator continue, you get told to sit down. "The rule," explained retired Senator Barbara Mikulski, "dated back to the early 1900s, when men used to come to the Senate floor, if they were working late, either drunk or making terrible, insulting comments about another senator's family, usually a spouse." They would nearly come to fist fights, she said, and this rule was made to calm down that kind of behavior. "Elizabeth was not carrying on in the way the rule prohibited," Mikulski said, "but was just speaking."[6]

"This is a reminder," Daines said, "you stated that a sitting senator is a disgrace to the department of justice." That was a line from a 1986 speech by the late Senator Ted Kennedy that she had read earlier in her remarks. Like King, Kennedy had denounced Sessions's nomination for a judgeship. Daines explained that the rule applied to any type of words, from quotes to articles or other materials. "The senator is warned," he said.

"So can I continue with Coretta Scott King's letter?" she asked.

"The senator may continue."

Elizabeth kept reading, and about twenty-five minutes later was stopped again. Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell claimed that Warren had violated the rule, citing a line from Mrs. King's letter. "The senator has impugned the motives and conduct of our colleague from Alabama, as warned by the chair," he said.

"The senator will take her seat," Daines said.

She appealed his ruling, and over the next hour and a half, the Republican-majority Senate voted to silence her.

After the tally, McConnell stood at a microphone and stated, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted."

Overnight, *Nevertheless, she persisted* became the motto for the new era of solidarity over women's rights ignited by the women's marches that had taken place a month earlier. The rallying cry sounded coast to coast, producing thousands of tweets posted under the new hashtags #ShePersisted and #LetLizSpeak.

Elizabeth created her own viral sensation after the procedural vote that night, reading King's letter outside the Senate chamber in a live Facebook video. "The Republicans took away my right to read this letter on the floor," she posted, "so I'm right outside, reading it now." By the next day, the video had more than six million views.[7] After another full day of debate, the Senate confirmed Sessions's nomination in a 52 to 47 vote.

The phrase that will always be identified with Elizabeth Warren resonates with the vitality of women's determination, but what can easily fade is the fact that the words were conceived in a debate about race. Elizabeth Warren's work on race, which has been substantial in terms of the amount of research and writing she has done about the financial oppression of African American and Latinx people (as much as her writing on the economic straits of women), is often overlooked

by those who profile and interview her. In an era of bitter immigration battles, exacerbated by a president who foments racial divisiveness, Warren's understanding of race is perhaps one of her strongest tools as a twenty-first-century leader.

The Great Recession still lingered for many when Massachusetts voters sent Elizabeth Warren to the Senate. She told them she would be her champion, and year by year, her consistent focus on issues that impact the household budgets of working people have strengthened her perception as that champion. Warren's recognition of her grasp of the role of race in America is joined by her knowledge of working people's economic struggles and the forces that impact them, gleaned from a thirty-year-long career of scholarship and teaching in the law that focused on bankruptcy. People were angry at the big banks, whose behavior cost them their pensions, homes, and jobs, and Elizabeth became a focal point for answers, offered up in plainspoken prose.

She knows the kitchen table struggles because she lived them, and that story of a populist's evolution begins in Oklahoma.

1

HARDWARE, BISCUITS, AND FITTING IN THE SOIL

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
…
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses…

—Willa Cather, "Prairie Spring"[1]

She was lucky to be tall for her age.

As a thirteen-year-old starting ninth grade at Northwest Classen High School in Oklahoma City, Elizabeth Ann Herring had skipped sixth grade and gone straight from the kiddie desks to the midcentury modern splendor of Oklahoma City's newest high school. She was as tall as her mother and not particularly confident about her looks, but

the girl her family called Betsy, who grew up in Norman, the university town twenty miles south, became a teenage freshman known as Liz in the fall of 1962.

The nearly three thousand students at Northwest Classen were taunted by some as "silkies" for living in this middle- and upper-class quadrant of the city where some homes had swimming pools and lawns manicured by hired help.[2] Heading to the main doors every morning, students passed the school mascot, a suit of armor complete with feathered helmet and jousting lance, symbol of the Northwest Classen Knights and serving as a daily reminder, perhaps, of the fights ahead. Liz signed on to several groups that first year, starting with the Cygnets pep club, which involved a hazing ritual designed as the ultimate teenage girl's humiliation: newcomers wore mismatching clothes, colored socks, flats, and no makeup on pledge day. She also joined the Junior Classical League, open to students taking Latin and famous for the annual Roman banquet where the wrists of first-year "slaves" were bound in white plastic chains as they served trays of fruit. As a member of the Courtesy Club, she would spend every other Monday playing hostess at school events. Her successful audition to assess how well her personality, diction, and voice control would play over the speaker system landed her in the Announcer's Club as one of several who would read the school announcements every morning. By the end of the first week, she had balanced out all these frills by joining the debate team on the Forensic League. Joining up with activities seemed a surefire way for a new kid to fit in.[3]

Northwest Classen had opened just nine years earlier and was still considered the best high school in the city, a "dream school," as administrators called it.[4] The most qualified teachers, most with master's degrees, had been pulled in from schools all over the city. With seating arranged by alphabet, Liz spent the next four years sitting side by side in the same advanced-track classes with Katrina Harry. They went to school plays and football games together, ate hamburgers at the local drive-ins, and giggled over the corny dating advice a panel of senior boys gave in one of their family life classes. Their friendship sailed through those four years without a hitch, in spite of the one thing upon which they never agreed—politics. "She was very conservative back then," Katrina said. "I was from a family of Democrats—my dad was the campaign manager for U.S. Senator and former Oklahoma Governor Robert Kerr. Liz was not in favor of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society or welfare or any of that and was all over me for four years about the 'socialist' friends I kept. We joked around about it, and I called her an ice-cold Republican."[5] Liz was coming of age in a family that never discussed partisan politics, and when she reflected on her parents' party affiliation years later, she believed they had probably been populist Democrats, fond of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Two of her older brothers, however, were "dyed-in-the-wool Republicans." She recalled that her mother was a poll worker and brought her along to voting places each Election Day. Her first memory of someone talking about politics was from the time she was six years old, listening to

her grandmother, Hannie Reed, talk about the Great Depression. Hannie said, "Franklin Roosevelt made it safe to put money in banks, and he did a lot of other things, too."

The politics of Oklahoma were undergoing a major shift during Elizabeth's teenage years. Democrats had ruled the state since statehood in 1907, but in 1952, Oklahomans began voting for Republican presidents. With that undercutting of support for the national party, Democrats began to lose their hold on governorships, starting with the election of Henry Bellmon, the state's first Republican governor, the year Liz started high school. From there, Republicans began winning U.S. Senate and House races as well as more seats in the state legislature. Since that pivotal time in the 1950s, Oklahoma has made a complete turnaround from a Democratic stronghold with a state motto of *Labor omnia vincit*, "Labor conquers all," to its status today as one of the most conservative states in the country.[6]

Coming of age in the south in the 1960s also meant witnessing the civil rights movement firsthand. In 1963, while the nation was tuned in to the violence in Birmingham, Alabama, where Commissioner Bull Connor set police dogs and fire hoses on peaceful black protesters and Martin Luther King Jr. was sent to jail, desegregation was underway in some of Oklahoma City's restaurants and hotels. Clara Luper, a black history teacher at one of the city's segregated black high schools and advisor for the city's NAACP Youth Council, had famously organized lunch counter sit-ins with black children at the Katz Drug Store downtown in

1958. After her success in desegregating the store, she led many other peaceful protests, including one at an amusement park just two miles up the road from Liz Herring's high school. The Wedgewood Village Amusement Park had been closed to blacks since it opened in 1957, and in the summer of 1963, Clara set up protests with white and black pro-integration marchers.[7] The protests ultimately convinced the owner to open the gates to blacks that August, the same month as the March on Washington. By the time Liz graduated in 1966, the nation had seen the bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church; assassination of President John F. Kennedy; murders of Mississippi civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner; passage of the Civil Rights Act; and the Selma to Montgomery March.

Integration came to the Oklahoma City school district during Liz's senior year, at least among the faculty, as announced in a local paper: "Youngsters in five all-white schools will find a Negro teacher on the faculty for the first time. Two Negro schools also will have their first white teachers."[8] The new teacher at her school, William Wedgeworth, taught industrial arts and advised the Amateur Radio Club and Electronics Club. Mr. Wedgeworth's shop was a boys' class, but one of the faculty who made a lasting impression on Liz was her sophomore English teacher, Judy Garrett. Her self-possessed mix of calm and confidence fed Liz's desire to be a teacher and came through as they read *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Julius Caesar* and listened to Mrs. Garrett's story about getting a glimpse of the Beatles during

a European trip.[9] "Liz was really young for high school," Judy said, "but she was probably the brightest student I've ever taught. She was a little bulldog-type person, always questioning; she was so far ahead of the others. It was delightful to have her in class because she always kept me on my toes."[10]

Judy figured that because Liz was younger, she may not have felt like she "fit in the soil," but she stood out academically and was a strong communicator, always making her point in logical sequence—one, two, three. No irony is lost on the fact that Judy, who gave Liz advice about being her own person, was forced by school policy to quit when she became pregnant. "You could not wear pants," she said, "and you could not show that you were pregnant. That really sums up the era."[11]

The Herrings lived one mile away from Northwest Classen, just a block within the dividing line that put them in the school district. The two-story, colonial-inspired house on Northwest Twenty-Fifth Street looked at least twice as big as the house they had left in Norman, with two white pillars at the doorway standing on a set of semicircular, red-brick steps. It was an attractive house with white paint and black shutters that matched the steeply pitched roof. Houses along the block did not follow any particular style—a colonial could stand next to a stocky house built of bricks from the red clay soil of the region—but the front yards were roomy and well-kept. Her high school friend Joe Pryor, who later made a career in real estate in Oklahoma City, recalled Liz's neighborhood as lower

middle class. Not as upscale as other neighborhoods around the high school, but not working class either.[12]

Defining the middle class has never been an exact science, but descriptions usually revolve around income. While economists have different ideas about the boundary lines, one popular formula puts the middle in a range between the poorest 20 percent at the bottom and the wealthiest 20 percent at the top. Liz's parents had their own criteria, and regardless of how strapped they were financially, they always considered themselves middle class. "For them, the distinction was they used good English, and they didn't say 'ain't,'" the adult Liz, known as Elizabeth, said many years later. "Those were important indicia of middle-classness of my folks."

Liz later described her family as living on the "ragged edge of the middle class," at times barely getting by.[13] "We grew up on the same path," said her classmate Joe Mallonee, who lived a few blocks away. "The homes in those neighborhoods ranged from small two-bedrooms with no garage to mansions. Where we lived by the mall, it looked nice from the outside, but we didn't have the money to pay the bills."[14] The mall was Shepherd Plaza, the city's first enclosed shopping center, which opened just a block and a half away from the Herring's house when Liz was a sophomore. She learned how to drive in that parking lot, weaving her dad's old Studebaker up and down the rows.[15] Joe felt a kinship with Liz through their need to start working early on. He stashed money away to buy nice shirts, and she bought fabric to sew her own blouses, sleeveless pullover

jumpers, and dresses. "Kids like me and Liz," he said, "were always trying to keep up."[16] For Liz, working early on meant starting to wait tables at her Aunt Alice's restaurant at age thirteen, sewing dresses for her aunts throughout high school, and keeping up the babysitting she'd begun in Norman as a nine-year-old.

The Herrings were Methodists in heavily Baptist, Bible Belt Oklahoma. Liz's mother taught Sunday school at the May Avenue United Methodist Church near the high school, and the churches, like the schools, were either white or black. Northwest Classen students only interacted with blacks when they played against them in basketball, baseball, football—or debate. "Oklahoma City had a large black population," said Karl Johnson, Liz's debate partner for three years, "but in our part of the city, they were virtually invisible. They literally lived on the other side of the tracks."[17] As debaters, however, Karl and Liz had regular encounters with black students. "We debated those kids from Douglass High School and made friends with them," he said.[18] They also debated black students in out-of-state tournaments, and Karl felt that these experiences outside the boundaries of their white middle-class school and neighborhood broadened them in a way that nothing else in high school could have.

Joining the debate team was a commitment to hours of research and practice every afternoon after classes. Divided into two-person teams, debaters dealt with two levels of competition—first between their own teams to see who was good enough to represent the school

in tournaments, and next as competitors in those tournaments. The two top teams at Northwest Classen were a mix of both genders—from Liz's sophomore through senior years, she and Karl Johnson made up the A team, which had the most wins, and Jeanette Yeager and Joe Pryor were the B team.[19] Their coach, school counselor Dick Mitchell, was a demanding and respected mentor. "He didn't suffer fools," Joe Pryor said, "and you knew you had earned your spot. You won on merit, nothing else. We all wanted to please him."[20]

Liz's move from a novice debater in her freshman year to the top team was all Karl's work. He and Joe had made up the A team their first year on the team, but Liz stood out and made a strong impression on Karl. "At the end of the year, I had to do something very difficult," he said, "and tell Joe that I wanted to be Liz's colleague for the next three years. Our skills meshed perfectly."[21] The fact that all these freshmen were the best debaters on the team revealed that Liz's incoming group was exceptionally bright, and Liz's younger age was never a factor. "She was our equal," Karl said, "and we all gained a lot of confidence over four years."[22]

Joe remembered Liz as very self-directed, unlike himself, admittedly a typically distracted male teenager. "Two things separated Liz as a top debater," he said. "She was intense about her research and outstanding at rebuttal. She could take apart an argument extremely well."[23] Fifty years later, when he saw her on television questioning someone during a senate committee hearing using meticulous research and always steering the process back to her exact points,

he recognized the same person from debate class. He also recalled that her successes never went to her head. As she and Karl racked up trophies from tournament wins year to year, she "never tried to act superior," he said, "but she certainly could have."[24] The teams often studied in the main library downtown, which held all the political and policy magazines like the *Economist* and *U.S. News and World Report*. Even during those hours, out of sight of Mr. Mitchell or anyone else who might have been keeping score, Liz kept up the pace. "If you had a discussion with her," Joe said, "you better bring the goods."[25]

Debate challenged and stretched them. "You got to travel to meets with kids in speech, debate, and drama who were at the top of their class, very smart and talented kids," Karl said. "The entire experience was formative, life changing. It made my life what it is."[26] Now a managing partner in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he practices Indian law and commercial law, Karl started his career as a legal aid attorney on the Navajo Reservation and then joined the faculty of the University of New Mexico School of Law. The spark for teaching and practicing Indian law came in high school, when he took a bus ride through the Deep South to attend a debate tournament. In their junior year, he and Liz had an opportunity to go to a major debate tournament in Miami Beach, Florida, but since they couldn't get an adult chaperone to sign on, Liz couldn't go. Karl teamed up with a senior, Andrew Mason, instead, and even though they didn't win, the trip was life changing for Karl.

Their Greyhound bus stopped at every station between Oklahoma City and Miami Beach, and Karl witnessed Jim Crow society at full hilt. As the son of a prosperous general manager of a car dealership in Oklahoma City, his debate trips were the only occasions to leave his upper-middle-class neighborhood or high school to witness the stark realities of segregation. "It was an absolute eye-opener," he said.[27] He came back a changed person, more radicalized than he had already become under the influence of the civil rights movement and Vietnam War. Liz did not undergo the same radicalization as her close friend Karl those years, but that did not mean that her youthful conservative mind-set was fixed and inflexible. Through the next decades of her further education and development as a teacher and scholar, her outlook evolved.

Forensic debates, unlike the "debates" between political candidates aired on TV, are tightly structured and demand that both sides respond to each point made by the opposition. In the pre-word-processing or laptop era, debaters showed up with stacks of index cards containing quotes from government documents, journal articles, and other sources to draw upon as evidence in their arguments and rebuttals. While listening to an opposition team member, they took flowchart notes on legal pads to track the points they needed to address. Preparing for competition meant learning that year's issue inside out, since they had to be ready to either defend the topic or argue against it in any given tournament. Then, like now, four years of debate wires a teenager for logic, for looking at all sides of an issue,

for backing up what she says, for the quick wits of thinking on her feet, and for speaking with impeccable clarity.

The national debate topics those years—free trade, socialized medicine, nuclear weapons—allowed them to delve into the nuts and bolts of policy issues that are still hot topics today, and their conversations revolved around politics and current events. "Debate," Joe Pryor said, "got us out of the confines of our place and into the world that was waiting for us."[28]

Being on the top team didn't ensure that Liz could make every tournament or student congress. Tight finances at home sometimes put a wrench in her plans, but very few of her classmates knew it. "Most of the students on the debate team came from families where the dad was a professional," said Joe Mallonee.[29] For them, money wasn't an issue when it came to meals and lodging at out-of-town competitions. But Liz's situation was different, since her dad worked retail at Montgomery Ward and earned a lower-middle-class salary. Joe recalled that Liz had to miss debate tournaments at times because she couldn't afford the hotel room.

Studying policy issues did not leave much time for a social life, but the debate team also delivered on that front. In her first year, Liz dated another member of the team, Jim Warren, a seventeen-year-old junior. Jim was a math whiz who got top grades in everything, worked on the school council, and was a member of the Key Club, a group that did community service around the city. They seemed to balance each other—Liz was positive and energetic, always in a

good mood, and Jim was more subdued. Karl described Jim as the quiet type, a salt-of-the-earth, great guy who happened to be really smart—"burning hot smart in physics and math."[30] While he was very smart, Karl recalled, he didn't have the equally persuasive skills, because he was a little more withdrawn. "His debate was heavy on logic and short on emotion," Karl said. Regardless of Jim's slightly inferior gifts of persuasion, his math prowess would land him a very interesting—even historic—job in the years to come.

Liz didn't consider herself pretty, she wrote in *A Fighting Chance*, but her yearbook photos say otherwise.[31] Her brunette bangs drew attention to her light eyes, her smile was bright and genuine, and her overall expression was cute, charming, and attractive. She experimented with her hair, sometimes growing it to her shoulders, but never wore it in a stiff early1960s "do" that was popular with many of the girls. She sewed her own clothes and didn't fuss over her looks. "She wasn't a froufrou girl," Katrina said. "If she remembered to put a lipstick in her purse, that would really be something."[32]

Since Jim lived four doors down from Katrina, Liz would meet him there and spend a lot of time at Katrina's house. "They were a perfect couple, intellectually matched," Katrina said.[33] But the romance didn't survive long. When Jim became a senior the next year, he made two changes—wearing black-rimmed glasses and breaking up with Liz. "He was the first boy I'd ever dated—and the first to dump me," Liz said.[34] The breakup, along with the family troubles she would endure in high school, may have brought Mrs. Garrett's

Shakespeare, at least one line of *Julius Caesar*, closer to home: "This was the most unkindest cut of all."

Liz and Karl won a national tournament their senior year, bringing home a tall, gold-cup trophy for first place in cross-examination debate at the Bellaire Tournament in Houston. In her four years at Classen, she discovered her talent for fighting with words, becoming, as she put it, "the anchor on the debate team."[35] The competitive pressure and intellectual challenge taught her that she had the self-discipline to master complex subjects on her own. Before she graduated, she understood that losing an intellectual battle during a round didn't mean she was beaten—the greater lesson was about challenging herself and never giving up. "Debate let me stretch as far as I could go," she said.[36] Her wins gave her confidence, something she could take with her and build upon, unlike the trophies behind glass that remain to this day in the Northwest Classen lobby, gathering dust.[37]

As much as Liz came to know the rewards of being masterfully prepared, she also learned how to stay calm under fire and use a loss as an opportunity to be better next time. That resiliency showed up on both sides of her family line, starting with her parents, who met during tough times in Oklahoma.

Liz's parents were both from Wetumka, a town in Eastern Oklahoma with a population of about twenty-one hundred in 1928, the year

they met. Pauline was fifteen, and Donald was four years older, a self-trained pilot with a passion for airplanes who worked summers at Herring Hardware, the family business. Elizabeth described her teenage mother as a girl who played the piano and loved to sing, "a whisper-thin, dark-haired beauty who was lively and funny."[38]

Donald married Pauline, his "Polly," in January 1932, smack in the throes of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Oklahoma felt the brunt in decimated crops, job losses, and bankruptcies, all of which changed lives in every corner of a small town like Wetumka. In the early 1930s, half the state's teachers were not paid, and the Wetumka school term was cut back to a mere four and a half months.[39] Drought dried up the fields, and locals talked about winds whipping the dusty soil into dunes so high along the barbed-wire fences that cattle could walk right over them. Even though the worst dust storms were in the Oklahoma Panhandle, towns in the east also had their share, like the big duster that hit Wetumka in April 1935 and created a visibility of zero that shut down the town.[40]

Wetumka did its best to keep spirits up. In 1933, with hotels closing down and businesses going bankrupt, one of the Ford dealers held a draw to give away a new automobile to boost community morale. In front of a big crowd gathered on Main Street, a girl named Miss Geneva was selected to dip her hand into the hopper and pull out the winner, someone who turned out to be in dire straits and did not own a car. A couple of years later, a new building project put a few electricians back to work to extend wiring out to a farm

on the outskirts of town. The property was selected as a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp for young black men, built as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to create jobs during the Depression. The CCC program put millions of men to work on environmental projects around the country and was considered one of the most successful work-relief programs of the New Deal. As one of three segregated CCC camps in Oklahoma, the Wetumka camp put the men to work planting trees, reseeding farmland, and building hundreds of miles of erosion-resistant farm terraces. Since the town was segregated and workers had no recreational options in the camp, the downtown Nusho Theatre movie house closed the doors to everyone but the black CCC workers on Thursday nights. Years later, the CCC site became a German POW camp where about four hundred German prisoners lived and were sent out to work on Wetumka farms.[41]

Elizabeth described the Great Depression as a "constant presence" in her family's story, an era that brought trouble from without and within.[42] Her Aunt Bee told her about the day her local bank failed and drew a crowd to the locked front doors. Bee, who was still single at the time, was living with her elderly parents and bringing home a salary from her secretarial job. Her father, Liz's grandfather, Harry Reed, lost everything he'd saved from his lifetime of construction work, and even after Bee's pay was cut in half, it was all they had to survive on. Bee didn't approve of her mother's habit of using their scarce cash to feed the jobless men who appeared at the back door

every morning. Across the country, millions of men and thousands of women took to the rails in search of work and stopped in small towns along the way to earn a meal or two by working odd jobs. Elizabeth's grandmother, Bethania "Hannie" Reed, never turned away these strangers but instead doled out biscuits and plates of grits or whatever else she had on hand. Bee fought her on it and became so frustrated that one day, she stood down her mother at the stove and yelled, "Stop feeding these bums! We don't have enough for ourselves!" That outburst haunted Liz's Aunt Bee from that day, and decades later at her mother's deathbed, she tearfully told her how sorry she was for it.[43]

Through this time, Herring Hardware stayed afloat thanks to an inventory as diverse as a general merchandise store. Farm machinery sales may have been down, but people stopped in for other necessities like furniture, rugs, paint, horse-drawn buggies and wagons, refrigerators and stoves, radios, saddles, harnesses, kitchen appliances, tires, and even caskets.[44] The store had been in the family since 1910 when Liz's great-grandfather, John Herring, bought Lumley's Hardware. Known to everyone in town as "Uncle Jack," John saw a lot of the world before settling in Eastern Oklahoma. Born in Cornwall, England, he came to the United States with his parents when he was six years old.[45] While he and his wife raised their family in Billings, Montana, he traveled the world as a sales representative for the International Harvester Company. After moving to Wetumka, he got into the competitive hardware business,

joined the Wetumka Masons, and became active in town affairs such as directing the cornet band that entertained the town with outdoor concerts. In 1920, he opened a second store about ninety-five miles east of Wetumka in Sallisaw for his son Frank to run.

John's father, also named John Herring (Liz's great-great paternal grandfather), was born in Tintagel, a Cornwall town on the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic that has held a magical spell on the British since the twelfth century. Around 1135, Geoffrey of Monmouth released the *History of the Kings of Britain*, introducing the legend of King Arthur and the name of his birthplace, Tintagel.[46]

Great-grandfather John Herring's son Grant—Elizabeth's paternal grandfather—ran Herring Hardware in Wetumka and extended credit to his impoverished customers throughout the Depression. Liz grew up hearing her father's stories of how many of these townsfolk left Oklahoma and headed west, lured by advertisements for jobs in California's lush agricultural regions.[47] Many may have tried to erase the Dust Bowl misery they left behind, but some never forgot their roots—or their debts. "Twenty year later," Elizabeth wrote, "my grandfather would still get an occasional envelope with a few twenty-dollar bills and a handwritten note: 'Grant, we finally got ahead a little. Put this on my account, and let me know if I owe you more.'"[48]

By the time Liz's dad was thirteen, Herring's was the largest hardware store in town.[49] The oil boom was still on, bringing some stability to the state's economy during the Depression. A few years later when Donald was dating Pauline, his grandfather John got lucky

with some land he'd bought in Oklahoma City. Wells were cropping up all over the capitol since the Oklahoma City Oil Field opened within the city limits in the spring of 1930. In June, the Mid-Texas Petroleum company completed building an oil and gas well on John Herring's property with prospects of producing twenty-two thousand barrels a day and tapping into eighty million cubic feet of natural gas.[50] After Mid-Texas No. 1 was up and running, a newspaper in Sallisaw, where John's son Frank (Elizabeth's great-uncle) ran the second hardware store, reported, "Frank Herring stated this week that while many of his father's friends had felt that he had made a bad purchase when he came into possession of the Oklahoma City lots, the senior Mr. Herring now has the last laugh—and the best."[51]

Mid-Texas No. 1 was one of the 870 producing wells that dotted the city landscape in 1932, the peak year for the Oklahoma City Oil Field. That year, the city's wells produced a combined sixty-seven million barrels, and the field remained one of the most productive in the country for the next forty years.[52]

Liz's father, Donald Herring, was studying engineering at Oklahoma A&M College in Stillwater when he married Pauline Reed in 1932. One hundred miles northwest of Wetumka, the university kept him away from home except for summers, when he came back to the family and his job at Herring Hardware. For years, he had been working

at the store during school vacation days and summers, learning the ropes of retail commerce from his father, manager Grant Herring. In a small town like Wetumka, everyone knew the families who ran the stores and businesses and political life. Pauline's father, Harry Gunn Reed, who had come south from Illinois, was a builder who had begun putting up small houses and one-room schoolhouses when the region was still Indian Territory. His wife, Bethania, a native of Missouri who came to the area in a covered wagon as a teenager, raised their large family in which Pauline was the youngest.

Harry Reed's grandfather, Joseph Reed, was an Illinois state representative who had migrated to Illinois from Ohio in 1838 with his wife, seven children, and parents in a covered wagon to stake out a homestead. He was forty-five when he set up his family in Madison Township in the southeastern section of the state and is credited for naming Richland County after suggesting it be named after the county in Ohio from which he and many others came.[53] Joseph, Elizabeth's maternal great-great-grandfather, was a member of the Whig Party when he served in the Illinois General Assembly from 1845 to 1847, not far behind another Whig, Abraham Lincoln, who finished his last term in the assembly in 1942.[54]

Pauline was studying at the teacher's college in Ada, about fifty miles from home, while Donald was at A&M. They were in love and planned to marry, but Donald's family rejected the match.[55] As Elizabeth later described the situation, Pauline's family included Native American ancestors on both her mother's and father's sides,

and the Herrings "made it clear that they did not approve. They looked down on my mother and her family, and when my father announced that he wanted to marry my mother, his parents were adamantly opposed."[56] That deep-running enmity crushed any chance the couple had of a wedding, so during spring semester of 1932, they left for Holdenville, twenty miles away, to be married by a Methodist minister in a ceremony witnessed by two people, including the minister's wife. When they came home, their elopement made the *Wetumka Gazette*:

> The marriage of Donald Herring and Miss Pauline Reed, two of Wetumka's most popular young people, came as a surprise to many of their friends when they returned from Holdenville late Saturday afternoon and announced their marriage.[57]

When Elizabeth was very young, she learned about her parents' elopement by pestering her mother about her wedding dress. She relayed that conversation in an interview for the *New Yorker*:

> I said to my mother, "What did your wedding dress look like? Tell me about your wedding dress."
>
> And my mother stiffened up and said, "I didn't have one." I couldn't imagine how you couldn't have one. And I couldn't leave this alone and I could

> remember asking—even though you're asking something that's going to upset your mother—so I'd ask again… "So, was Aunt Bea your maid of honor, or was Aunt Max your maid of honor, or did you pick Aunt Alice?" Because she had these three sisters and I thought, What a quandary! What a problem! How do you pick? And she said, none of them. And finally my mother said to me, "Your Daddy and I loved each other very, very much, but we couldn't get married, so we ran away and got married, and we didn't have our family with us."[58]

The Herring and Reed families never mended their rift and, as Elizabeth recalled, were rarely seen in the same room again, even though they continued to live in the same small town of roughly two thousand people. "As kids, we got it: There was Daddy's family and there was Mother's family," she wrote. "We saw Mother's family all the time. But visits with Daddy's family were infrequent, planned long in advance, and always very stiff."[59] The situation robbed Pauline of the embrace of her husband's family, but it never stifled the Reeds from talking about their Native American ancestry. Liz and her brothers grew up listening to their aunts, uncles, and grandparents tell stories about how the grandfolks met in Indian Territory and had Cherokee and Delaware heritage. Those ancestral claims surfaced during Elizabeth's Senate campaign in 2012, when her opponent,

Scott Brown, and others accused her of using her minority status to get jobs in academia. That story is told in a later chapter, but the background of family claims to Native American heritage, particularly among Oklahomans, sheds light on why Elizabeth stood her ground to defend her family's stories.

The history of the region has made white claims of Native American ancestry especially prevalent in Oklahoma. President Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act began the forced migration of the Choctaw, Seminole, Creek, Chickasaw, and Cherokee from their lands in the southeast to the region west of the Mississippi that had begun to be called Indian Territory. These tribes were known collectively as the Five Civilized Tribes for their assimilation of some aspects of European/American culture and intermarriage with whites. The Cherokee removal, known as the Trail of Tears, in which four thousand Cherokees died, was followed by another movement of tribes who, already forced into Nebraska and Kansas, were removed once again and sent south to Indian country. In fact, as historian Laurence French wrote, "the Trail of Tears was played out dozens of times during the nineteenth century with other tribes that were eventually removed to Indian Territory."[60]

In the late 1800s, railroad expansions and the discovery of oil in Oklahoma Territory created a burning push for statehood. Oklahoma became the largest oil-producing region in the world, and in 1890, the federal government divided the region into Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory, with Indian Territory reduced to slightly more

than half of the eastern section of the original area. In the land rush of 1899 (still before statehood), homesteaders staked their claims across the nearly two million acres that the government had opened to settlement in what were called the Unassigned Lands, nonpopulated areas that the Creek and Seminole Indians ceded to the government after the Civil War. (Those who cheated the rush by crossing the border before the gunshot that launched the official run were labeled as "sooners," which gave Oklahoma the nickname the Sooner State.)[61]

Native American leaders tried to avoid joint statehood by convening the Sequoyah Convention and drawing up a constitution for their own state. The U.S. Congress refused to consider the statehood bills advanced on their behalf and instead confirmed the joining of the two territories into the state of Oklahoma in 1907.[62] The Native Americans left an indelible mark with their Sequoyah Constitution, however, since many elements of it were incorporated into the Oklahoma Constitution. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society, the two shared many similarities, including "an underlying Populist distrust of elected officials."[63]

This history reveals why many Oklahomans share stories of Native American heritage, probably more than those from any other state. Census figures estimate that 4.5 million Americans identify themselves as Native Americans or Alaskan Natives, yet only two million are actually enrolled in tribes.[64] Since the Cherokee Nation is the largest tribe in the country, with the leadership of its 355,000 citizens located in its capitol in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, family stories

of Cherokee ancestry are the most common.[65] This is not to say that any such claim is not true, but Cherokee membership is limited to those whose ancestors appear on specific rolls that were drawn up in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the 2012 Senate campaign controversy over Elizabeth Warren's claims of Cherokee heritage, Elizabeth never said that she or anyone else in her family had tribal membership, a separate issue from heritage.[66]

In a 2012 article in *Indian Country Today*, Gene Norris, a genealogist with the Cherokee Heritage Center, explained, "When the U.S. federal government took the U.S. federal population Census for 1900, Indian Territory was divided into two sections—non-Indian population and Indian population—[and] 61 percent of the Cherokee Nation's population were not legally considered Cherokee but U.S. citizens who had migrated from other states such as Arkansas, living in the Cherokee Nation." In the same article, Myra Vanderpool Gormley, a certified genealogist specializing in Cherokee and Native American history, stated that there are "various Indian rolls from about 1885 that identify Indians by tribe and name. Most of them pertain to Indians living on reservations and not in the general population." These rolls include the Final Rolls of Citizens and Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory, a roll covering 1898–1906 commonly known as the Dawes Rolls, and the 1924 Baker Roll of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee, which was a compilation of several older rolls.[67]

The editors of *Indian Country Today* wrote that "oral history does

carry some weight in genealogical circles,"[68] and genealogist Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak (the double name is correct) explained in the *Atlantic* that as an Oklahoma native, Elizabeth Warren's family stories were "wildly common."[69]

By the time Donald Herring registered for the draft in 1940, he and Pauline had two boys, Don Reed and John, ages six and three. They had survived the Dust Bowl 1930s, and Elizabeth would grow up hearing her mother's stories about raising a baby during those years. She would put Don Reed to sleep and drape a wet sheet over his crib to protect him from the dust. When she came back a couple of hours later, Elizabeth said, "the sheet would be dry and stiff and covered with caked mud. And that's how they lived."

By 1940, the leading sentiment among Americans was to stay out of the war raging in Europe, and congressmen had come to blows on the House floor over whether or not the country should institute a draft in peacetime.[70] Germany had invaded Poland, Holland, Belgium, France, Denmark, and Norway and was bombing London when the Selective Service and Training Act passed and was signed by President Franklin Roosevelt in September 1940. At the signing ceremony, he said, "We must and will marshal our great potential strength to fend off war from our shores. We must and will prevent our land from becoming a victim of aggression."[71]

Donald, who loved flying, hoped to join the army air force, but at nearly twenty-nine, the army considered him too old to be a fighter pilot, according to Elizabeth's recollection of the family story. He was selected to serve as a flight instructor instead and assigned to the air fields in Muskogee, a larger town in eastern Oklahoma about seventy-five miles northeast of Wetumka.[72]

Throughout the war, the center at Hatbox Field graduated more than thirty-seven hundred pilots, and soldiers at Davis Field were trained for aerial photographic reconnaissance missions. Davis was also the airport where supplies were flown in for nearby Camp Gruber, a massive infantry and tank division training camp where four thousand civilians worked and nearly forty-five thousand troops were trained by the end of the war.[73] After hearing her parents' stories, Elizabeth imagined how her father left for work each morning in his leather flight jacket and trainer's cap tilted to one side. "Daddy loved to fly," she wrote, "and these were good years for them."[74]

The Herring's third son, David Lee, was born in the last year of the war, and Donald looked forward to putting his years of experience into a new career. "When the war finally ended," Elizabeth recalled, "Daddy desperately wanted a job flying the new passenger planes for one of the fast-growing airlines like TWA or American. But that didn't work out either."[75] Like the army air force in 1940, the airlines were looking for younger men. He and Pauline talked about going home to Wetumka where he could work at the family store, but when his father told him there wasn't work for him, he

scrambled to make another plan. He moved the family to Seminole, a small town about a half hour drive west of Wetumka, where he and a partner set up a car lot. Donald worked in the garage, and his partner wore the dual hats of salesman and front office clerk. Seminole's oil boom days had come and gone years before the war, leaving it once again a small town on the Rock Island line. Donald's bad luck didn't end with his new business—one day, his partner cleared out the cash and left town.

Elizabeth was born not long afterward on August 6, 1949, while her father was working a string of postwar jobs. Her brothers were four, twelve, and fifteen, and the family soon settled in Norman, just south of Oklahoma City. The home of the University of Oklahoma since its founding in 1890, Norman was a bustling and growing college town of about twenty-seven thousand people. Donald and Pauline took out a mortgage for a tiny, two-bedroom, blond-brick house on W. Haddock Street, part of a new addition inching its way onto the prairie. Five posts held up the roof overhang to create a narrow porch facing the gravel street, and out back, the garage was converted into a bedroom for the boys. Set on a corner lot, the backyard looked out onto the sparse yards of the other houses down the block and gave plenty of room for the sandbox Donald built with a frame above for a swing to hang upon.

The train tracks were a quarter mile away to the west, a reminder day and night of the Santa Fe Railroad that created the town along its north-south route through Indian Territory. The railroad had already

built a station house and plotted out the town at right angles to the tracks in time for the land rush, after which Norman became a town overnight. The tracks also marked the east-west divide that identified the political leanings of the town since its earliest days. The east side, which tended to be Democratic, won the fight over where the county courthouse would be built, and in a hotly contested debate, the Republicans won the battle for the location of the university west of the tracks. By the 1950s, the town and its carefully planted trees had surrounded the Collegiate Gothic university buildings that once stood like giant board game pieces on the flat, naked plain.[76]

Liz, or Betsy as her family called her when she was a little girl, started school eleven blocks from home at Woodrow Wilson Elementary, an imposing red-brick schoolhouse with a Gothic arch entrance. Cherrie Birden, who was three years older than Betsy and principal of the school in the 2000s, recalled that the town was so bursting with postwar children at the time that the overcrowded school held some classes in nearby homes.[77]

Betsy's most memorable year at Wilson was second grade, when she found her calling. At a time when few women worked outside the home, her teacher, Mrs. Lee, was moved one day to have a little talk with her about what girls could do when they grew up. In that brief conversation, Betsy learned for the first time that she had options. "She took me aside to say that, if I wanted to, I could *do something*," Elizabeth wrote. The idea percolated inside her for weeks, and later that school year, she strode up to Mrs. Lee's desk and declared that

she would be a teacher, like her. Mrs. Lee said, "Yes, Miss Betsy, you can." Mrs. Lee didn't leave it at that but instead gave her a chance to try things out by letting her work with the lower-level reading group. She found herself in the reading corner, surrounded by classmates as they read aloud and listened for her to chime in when they stumbled. The thrill she felt each time she helped someone "get it" lit a fire in her, and from then on, she played teacher every chance she could get with the kids in the neighborhood.[78]

Another who made a lasting impression during her girlhood days seemed to magically snap out of the TV set and onto the front sidewalk of Wilson Elementary. Norman's most famous native son, actor James Garner, paid a visit to see family in the late 1950s and spent some time saying hello to the kids at his old elementary school.[79] Garner's pre-Hollywood name was James Bumgarner, which made him the great-grandson of Levi Briggs, one of the town's most prosperous businessmen in its first decades. Briggs owned whole blocks of Main Street and had a stake in several cotton gins in towns throughout the state.[80] Garner was the dashing star of the TV western *Maverick* at the time, and the sight of him—better yet, the fleeting touch of his hand on her shoulder—made Betsy realize that life held astounding possibilities, even for folks from Norman.[81]

For as long as she could remember, her mother's sister Bessie Amelia, or "Aunt Bee," babysat her and gave her special gifts, like a new dress at the start of every school year. Dresses were for school and church; the rest of the time, Betsy tore around in play clothes

that faded in the Oklahoma sun. She was an active girl, carousing with the other kids and her little dog Missy on the lawns of Haddock Street hard enough to break her nose twice.[82] When spring days heated up and school vacation was near, children in tornado country learned the shifts of color that spelled danger in the skies. Watching thunderclouds creep in from the southwest, especially in April and May, sometimes revealed an eerie green cast to the sky—hail and tornado weather. Three tornados hit Norman during Betsy's childhood, none of them strong enough to kill or injure anyone but real enough to set the sirens blaring hours after she had gone to sleep.[83] Up in Oklahoma City, forty-one tornados would dip down in the fifteen or so years she lived in the state. The worst during her high school days were two category F3 (out of F5) twisters that blasted concrete buildings into ash.[84]

While Betsy grew up in Norman, her two oldest brothers finished school and left for the military, first Don Reed into the air force, and then John after him. David Lee joined the army a few years later after the family moved again. Don Reed would make a career of the air force and fly 285 combat missions in Vietnam, serving in a way his father had dreamed of doing during the Second World War.[85]

Betsy babysat and never tired of talking about becoming a teacher, an idea that riled her mother, who was raised to believe that women who worked were just unfortunate souls who couldn't find a man and settle down. Pauline couldn't make much headway urging her daughter to be more girly, to curl her hair once in a while or

play with makeup. She wanted Betsy to get the ridiculous notion of teaching out of her head, since no one in their family had finished college, and besides, a girl's highest goal should be to marry a good man who would give her financial security.[86] The message about a woman's place came through loud and clear, not just during tense conversations with her mother but from everywhere she looked. Women in Norman—except her teachers—were in their kitchens, in church with their families, at the grocery store with their children in hand. The dads were behind the counters at the post office and drugstores or out of sight until they pulled into their driveways at six o'clock. No girl could prevent that message from getting beneath her skin.

Pauline's wish for Betsy's future as a happy, well-married young woman led her to convince Donald that they should move to the city where Betsy could attend an excellent high school. Education, as well as good pronunciation, was one of the family's criteria for being middle class. Betsy was eleven years old when they left Norman for Oklahoma City and started over again. Donald found a job selling carpet at Montgomery Ward, and Pauline sketched out where to plant roses in the front yard of the white two-story house. The old Studebaker stood in the driveway in front of the "new" used station wagon Donald bought for Pauline, the nice family car with air-conditioning and leather seats.[87]

The Shepherd District was a solid step up from their neighborhood in Norman, but within a year, Donald faced another hard

knock. Working on the car one day, he suffered a heart attack that put him in the hospital for a week. He was fifty-four years old, and his recovery kept him home long enough to see the bills start to pile up. As the weeks went by, the Herrings fell behind on their car payments and lost the station wagon. When Donald was finally well enough to go back to work, Montgomery Ward downgraded him from his salaried position to a commission-only job selling yard supplies and lawnmowers. His smaller paycheck took a toll on the overstretched family budget, and he and Pauline bickered and fought under the strain.[88]

No one needed to spell out the details for Liz—who now went by the more grown-up name among everyone at school—to understand that things were falling apart. Bill collectors called, and her mom cried in the kitchen and behind her bedroom door. One day, as Liz rode along with her mom and Aunt Bee to look at a house for rent in another neighborhood, a small, dusty place planted on cinder blocks, she wondered, *Are we poor? Are we losing our house?* At home, she listened to her mother yell at her father and caught the gist of her mother's bitterness over Donald's inability to provide for them. She also saw her parents drink more, "a lot more," she later wrote.[89] "The bottom just fell out for us."[90]

Pauline was determined to keep the house and had to face facts. Unless she went to work, the situation would only get worse, and they would be headed backward again, maybe even forced to find a rental outside the school district. She put on her best black dress

and heels one day and walked down the block and around the corner to Sears, where they were hiring, and landed a full-time, minimum-wage job taking catalog orders over the phone. Her income saved the mortgage and got them caught up, but even with two incomes, there wasn't money to spare.[91]

Now a student at Northwest Classen High School, Liz earned spending money by babysitting and, on long school breaks, working for her mother's sister Alice in Muskogee.[92] In a 2017 speech, she shared her aunt's story and the waitressing job that came from it:

> When I was thirteen, I started waiting tables at my Aunt Alice's restaurant. Aunt Alice had been widowed in her early fifties. She hadn't worked before Uncle Claude died, but she pulled up her socks and did what she knew how to do—cook. The place didn't make a lot of money, but she lived in the back of the restaurant, and she got by. I spent summers and holidays working for her and living in the back myself, and I saw first-hand the kind of commitment and energy it takes to launch a small business and to keep it going. Six days a week, from early morning until late evening, Aunt Alice did everything from arguing about the produce delivery to filling in for the dishwasher who didn't show up. On the seventh day, we scrubbed floors on our hands and knees and got ready for the next week.[93]

Liz was private about her home life those days, even among her close friends, but Katrina knew one thing—Liz idolized her brothers, gushing with pride when she brought up their military careers.[94] Other than that, her friends did not learn much about her family. "There were two sides of her," her friend Joe Pryor said, "one very personal side that was her own and that you couldn't reach, and another that made her very easy to talk to."[95] She tried to hide the fact that her parents struggled with money, making a silent agreement with her dad to get dropped off in the rusty Studebaker a block away from school.[96] Everyone else seemed to have a shiny new car, and she imagined herself the only student from a family with money problems. Instead of bringing friends over after school, which would bring up the question of why her mom was gone at work, she spent time at Katrina's, especially when she was dating Jim, who lived nearby.[97] The tension around money lightened somewhat but never completely lifted in the Herring household, and Liz seemed to internalize her mother's fear of losing everything. "I [was] afraid of being poor, really poor," she said.[98]

Her wobbly sense of security lived side by side with her confidence in her intellectual strengths. When she challenged herself, she won. When she gave something 100 percent, it paid off. The formula worked again and again, and not just in debate. In her senior year, she studied for the national exam for the Betty Crocker Homemaker of Tomorrow award and took the test in December. Far from a lightweight exercise about liquid measurements and proper table settings,

the knowledge and attitude test was based on a program covering ten subject areas, from the psychology of relationships and child development to money management and community affairs, developed by General Mills and taught at the school.[99]

The Betty Crocker program brought up discussions about women's roles that reflected the postwar ideal of the modern American housewife. Senior-class girls with ambitions for careers were compelled to wrestle with statements about the ability of women to achieve "completeness" as homemakers, such as this from the 1966 teaching aid booklet:

> The homemaker realizes the value of continuing education. She can increase her efficiency in the home with knowledge of time- and energy-saving devices and conserve human resources. She can continue to develop as a responsible and well-informed citizen in community and nation. She can make profitable use of leisure time through creative adult education and the library. As a result of her innate desire for on-going education, she fulfills herself as a complete personality—intellectually, culturally, and spiritually.[100]

To students who had read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published three years earlier, this idea may have sounded like a dictionary definition of what Friedan was challenging. The "complete"

fulfillment that the above Betty Crocker life map promised did not exist, according to Friedan, since life is about realizing one's full potential. Friedan would likely argue that a path toward such a potential would involve more than reading library books between household duties.

As a young woman, Liz battled the conflicting messages coming from her mother and culture and those arising from her inner self.[101] As she struggled with the contrast between the Betty Crocker ideal and her desire to teach—a desire for doing meaningful work—she had yet to benefit from the feminist writings soon to come. Scholars began looking closely at women's historical roles in the world of work and shed light on the development of the homemaker role and its less-than status in American society. As tidy as the personal completeness in the above statement sounds, homemaking in Liz's 1950s and 1960s was a far cry from the original meaning of women's work in the home that portrayed white women until the Industrial Revolution.

Before industrialization, women were equal partners in the economy of the family, making everything from scratch—growing crops for her baking and cooking, spinning yarn and cotton for sewing clothes, churning butter, and making soap and medicines. This work was critical to life and not considered beneath other occupations done by white men. Only when industrialization redefined the value of work as that which made a monetary profit for the business owners did this status change. As industries began making the products that

had been the woman's domain—and for the most part shut women out of those factories or paid them pittance wages—women were left with the lowly tasks of housework.

Since housework did not create a profit, it was considered inferior to wage work and the less-than view of "women's work" stuck. The Betty Crocker program was one more example of how women were taught that the work of human progress went on outside the home. It bolstered the concept of women as housewives, models of universal womanhood who were "naturally" separate from the world of work—and through the lens of the economy, naturally inferior. All this refers to America's white women; black women's history of doing outside work during and after slavery gave rise to the virtues of self-reliance and assertiveness. This contrasted with the virtues of "feminine weakness and wifely submissiveness" that society expected of white housewives. As Angela Davis wrote, black women escaped that label through their history of "work, work, and more work."[102]

The Betty Crocker program quote above perfectly illustrates how white, middle-class womanhood was defined by the time Liz was in high school. A fulfilled woman was one who efficiently managed the home, her leisure time, and her responsibilities as a citizen while never contributing to the world through her work or career. She educated herself to become a more interesting and engaging spouse. Liz, who had dreamed of a teaching career since girlhood and was performing better than most of the guys on the debate team, had to

grapple with those realities about herself alongside this ever-present expectation about marriage as the ultimate goal.[103] Some of the test questions hit this issue square on the mark, such as Test Item 13:

> Many teen-aged girls are faced with deciding between an early marriage and continuing their education. Which of the statements below is supported by research evidence?
>
> A. Happier marriages result when the wife has considerably less education than her husband.
> B. Excessive education for the wife will result in marital discord and tension.
> C. The more education a couple has, the more apt they are to have a happy marriage.
> D. The education of the wife is irrelevant to the success of her marriage.[104]

Correct answer "C" implies that college is a good thing, but only in terms of what the homemaker can bring to her relationship with her husband.

The Betty Crocker Homemaker of Tomorrow program made senior girls think about important issues they would face in life, which was significant. The downside—the assumption that women's greatest fulfillment came from homemaking—kept the homemaker role on a lower rung in society, because a person's value

was based on what she contributed to the profit-making part of the economy. One of the gifts of the feminism that began in the late 1960s was replacing that deeply embedded assumption with the idea of freedom—women's freedom to choose between homemaking and career without casting a negative label on either choice. Liz grew up in the prefeminist mind-set and matured as an intellectual, educator, and politician in the feminist era, to the point that she hates being asked questions about being a "woman" senator.[105] Those questions are often framed around the idea that women's leadership is freakishly unusual, a radical accomplishment. By not playing into that, she steers the mind-set toward female leaders as natural and normal.

Liz's hopes for a teaching career did not wane in high school, and Pauline continued to chide her about it. The pain this brought apparently ran deep, compelling Elizabeth the senator to share the scenario in the brief autobiographical section of *This Fight Is Our Fight: The Battle to Save America's Middle Class*:

> Whenever she heard me talking about my dreams of teaching, my mother would break into the conversation and explain to whomever I was talking to, "But she doesn't want to be an old-maid schoolteacher." (You could almost hear the fright music playing in the background.) Then she would turn to me, pause, and narrow her eyes. "Right, Betsy?"[106]

The issue of women and careers came at her from all sides. Being the star debater motivated her to discover everything she was capable of, while her mother's discouragements threatened to make her second-guess herself. The Betty Crocker program brought the conflict into higher relief with its discussion questions about women with careers: "Is it possible for a woman to do an adequate job of homemaking and have a professional career outside the home? What attitudes and abilities are important to consider?"[107]

However insightful or even irritating the process may have been, Liz spent enough time on the materials to earn the highest score on the one-hundred-question test and win the Betty Crocker gold-heart pin. Another senior girl in Oklahoma had the highest score statewide, however, and won a scholarship and a chance to win the national award.[108]

In *This Fight Is Our Fight*, Elizabeth also recalls that the friction between her and her mother came to a head one evening during her senior year when they were arguing about college. The fight became a one-sided shouting match, with Liz standing in stony silence and Pauline yelling insults—*What makes you think you're so special? Do you think you're better than the rest of us?* Liz stomped up to her room, and her mom followed, and when Liz finally shouted back—*Leave me alone!*—her mom slapped her hard across the face.

Liz threw some clothes together in a bag and ran out of the house. Her dad found her hours later at the bus station, shaking and red-faced from crying. He sat down beside her and told her how

awful he felt after his heart attack, so ashamed of being useless that he almost walked away from all of it, from them. She asked what made him change his mind. He held her hand and told her that things looked up, little by little: her mom got a job, and the bills got paid.

Then he turned to her and said, "Life gets better, punkin."[109]

Liz kept to her plan and sent off for applications to the two colleges she'd learned had strong debate programs, Northwestern in Illinois and George Washington University (GW) in Washington, DC.[110] Her friend and fellow debater Andrew Mason, who had graduated and was a freshman debater at GW, told her that the university had a very good debate scholarship. For all of her attempts to hide this process from her mother, she finally had to come clean in order to get access to her parents' tax returns for the financial section of the applications. Talking it over at the kitchen table, Liz argued that colleges had scholarships, but Pauline repeated what she had said for years—they couldn't afford it.[111] Liz persisted, pleading to at least be able to apply to those that offered full scholarships. Donald listened quietly to their back-and-forth and finally broke in, asking Pauline to let Liz try.

As she transferred her parents' financial information to the applications, Liz got another reality check about their hanging-by-a-thread situation. The low income listed in their returns ramped up her

anxiety that she may really be different from everyone else at school, an imposter among the well situated and secure. She may be *poor*.

That anxiety blew down the tracks the day she received her acceptance letter from GW, complete with a full scholarship. Pauline was proud to tell her friends that Liz was going to college, but she couldn't help adding that she doubted the girl would ever marry.[112] Even though she was hardheaded about Liz's choices, Pauline showed her love in tangible ways. She had considered quitting her job, but when Liz got accepted at GW, she stayed on at Sears to help pay some of her college expenses.[113] None of them imagined what Liz's future held, but Donald and Pauline, according to Liz's friend Joe Mallonee, "knew they had an exceptional child."[114]

Liz graduated from Northwest Classen in the spring of 1966. She was sixteen years old, with the schools' Grady Memorial Debate Award and a cluster of trophies in the lobby's glass cabinet to show for her past four years.[115] Out in the wider world, *The Sound of Music* won best picture at the Academy Awards, Ronald Reagan was running for governor of California, and five thousand U.S. Marines had just driven the North Vietnamese back over the demilitarized zone in Operation Hastings, the largest battle of the war to date.[116] Antiwar protests were rampant in cities all over the country, including Washington, DC, but Liz's strongest focus on current events would revolve around the issues taken up by the George Washington University debate team.