



ACORN FILE PHOTO

ROLE MODEL—Frances Prince in 2014. The former councilwoman told the *Thousand Oaks Acorn* at that time: "One of my goals was to develop a ring of open space around the valley, and we did." Prince died Feb. 6 at the age of 79.

■ City's first female mayor was champion for open space

By Becca Whitnall
becca@theacorn.com

Thousand Oaks would be a much different city were it not for Frances Prince.

The visionary former councilwoman—T.O.'s first female mayor—died last week at age 79, but residents who may never have met her can feel her impact as they hike the city's vast expanses of open space, browse titles at the city library, take in a show at the Civic Arts Plaza or simply play a game of catch at



Courtesy of Thousand Oaks Library Special Collections

LEADERS—Prince, center, in the 1980s with fellow council members, from left, Madge Schaefer, Larry Horner, Lee Laxdal and Alex Fiore.

— Please See **Page 17**

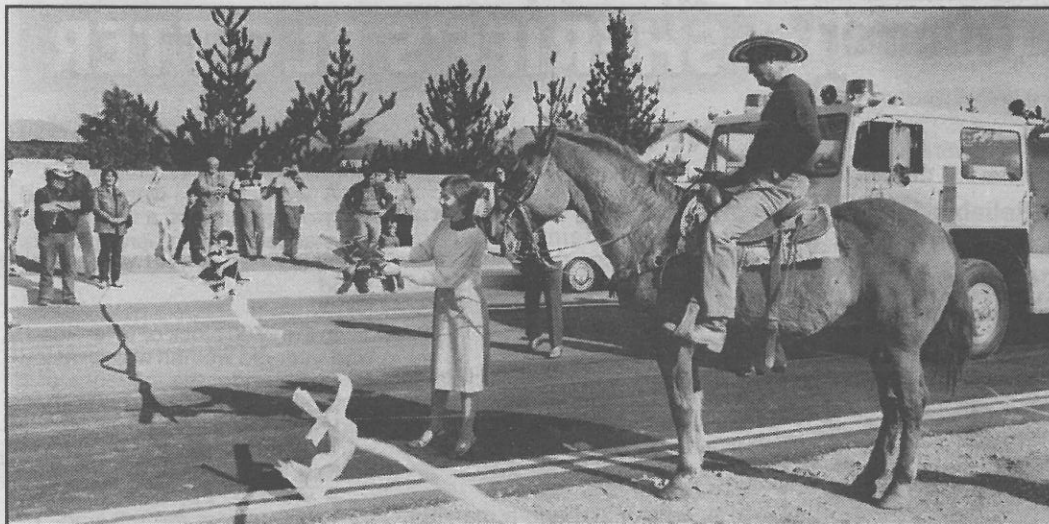


Photo by Mike Schiebel, courtesy of Thousand Oaks Library Special Collections, News Chronicle Collection

SHAPING OUR HISTORY—Frances Prince cuts the ribbon to officially open the Newbury Park extension of Lynn Road, from E. Kelley Road to Wendy Drive, in 1982. While serving on the council she earned her law degree. After her time on the council, Prince remained wholly involved in the community, serving in multiple roles such as acting as a consultant for nonprofit organizations and as president of Senior Concerns.



Photo by Gary Smoot, News Chronicle Collection

OUTSPOKEN—Prince speaks at the dedication ceremony for the Thousand Oaks Library on Jan. 23, 1982.

Prince

From Page 1 —

Wildflower Playfields.

"You can't go hardly anywhere in this town that hasn't benefited from Fran's intellect, her resolve, her fairness and her sense of what a community ought to be," said former city manager and city library namesake Grant Brimhall.

"I think she was one of the finest and most effective individuals in the history of this community in a whole variety of ways," he said.

A mom and wife first, Prince initially dipped her foot into the political arena in the 1960s by helping ensure that development company William Lyon Homes kept its promise to use some of its land in the Wildwood area for a park. The developer reportedly had planned on backtracking and instead building high-density housing on the plot.

The park had been one of the selling points for Prince and her husband, Harvey, when the couple and their three children moved from Riverside in 1968.

"Frances and her husband were driving by and saw people picketing, so she went over to see what was going on," Councilmember Andy Fox said. "She ended up organizing the group, forming an HOA and brought a lawsuit against the developer."

As a result, land was given to the Conejo Recreation and Park District.

Around the same time, Prince served on the 100-member citizens committee to write the city's original master plan.

"My vision, which was shared by a lot of other people, was that we would develop with a plan in mind and fairly slowly," Prince told the *Acorn* in 2014 for a biographical article. "We wanted to keep it as low-density as possible. . . . I think subsequent councils have been very good about following the general plan."

Having caught the attention of city leaders, Prince was appointed to the planning commission in 1972, where she served until 1975.

According to a 1997 Los Angeles Times article that dubbed her "Thousand Oaks' first lady of politics," it was local Emmy-nominated filmmaker and activist Michael Hagopian who recruited Prince to run for City Council.

She won and began serving in 1976.

"I had a very good vote count," she said in the 2014 *Acorn* article. "I think (I won with) a combination of having a good platform, working very hard and having a good committee."

Prince remained on the council from 1976 to 1984, twice serving as mayor, first in 1978 and again in 1982.

Shattering glass ceilings

Prince came to office while the country was celebrating its bicentennial, and politics, even at the city level, was still very much a man's world. Some Thousand Oaks residents celebrated the fact that she was the city's first female council member and then mayor, but that wasn't important to Prince, her family said.

"To other people it was a big deal, but it was not about the gender to her," Prince's son, Jack, said. "She just wanted to get the job done."

At the top of her long list of goals for the city was preserving a ring of open space around Thousand Oaks.

"At the time, it was significant because it wasn't common," she told the *Acorn* in 2014.

After all, the city was still mostly undeveloped, and it didn't occur to everyone that steps might need to be taken to ensure some of the vacant land remained, but Prince knew the time might come.

"The city has lost a pioneer and a visionary in many ways," said Fox, who credits Prince as one of the people who helped him get his first political appointment. "She was really one of the moving parties behind the formation of COSCA (Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency), and I think it was one of the great visions Frances had."

Not only did Prince help form the agency in 1978, she was the founding chair. She also chaired the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy board from 1980 to 1984 and worked to help acquire Danielson Ranch, now part of Rancho Sierra Vista, in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Prince was also a major force behind moving the Thousand Oaks library from a small building on Wilbur Road to its current location on Janss Road, and she advocated for building the Civic Arts Plaza.

Personal growth

In the midst of growing a community, Prince continued her formal education. She attended La Verne University's college of law and graduated as valedictorian in 1980. She was 39 when she began her legal education. Her children were 16, 13 and 10.

"She did it while still doing her council stuff and doing PTA stuff and still doing other stuff and still taking care of all of us," Jack Prince said. "She was always there for us—never missed a school play."

She'd earlier graduated cum laude with a double major in history and political science from San Diego State University. SDSU is where she and Harvey met.

After her two terms on the council, Frances Prince left to practice law, but her passion for community service tugged at her, and in 1990 she left the field of law to head the nonprofit Senior Concerns for nearly a decade.

While serving as CEO, she

moved the organization into a bigger facility, got it operating in the black and helped create sizable reserves, her children said.

Later, she was a consultant to nonprofit organizations, primarily on fundraising and organization. She also served on a number of volunteer community boards, including Cal Lutheran University, Los Robles Regional Medical Center and the Conejo Valley Art Museum.

"During those years, once they hooked you, it was very difficult to get away," said former council member and police chief Dennis Gillette. "We all shared a pride for how the city had evolved . . . and Frances Prince, with her husband Harvey's support, will have to go down as one of the most exceptional city leaders to date."

Prince, who died Feb. 6 after a long illness, was born in San Pedro on Oct. 24, 1937. She is survived by her children Jack Prince, Julie Prince, and Kirsten Amantia and

husband, Gregg; her brother, Ken Roush and his wife, Susan; four grandchildren; and her dog, Maximus. Harvey Prince died in 2000.

There will be no public services. Memorial donations may be made in her honor to Senior Concerns, Community Conscience and the Thousand Oaks Library Foundation.

Of the many lessons to be learned from Prince, her daughter Julie said, her mother's notes summed it up when she was asked to contribute to a book in which community leaders write advice to their 21-year-old selves:

"Always keep one eye on the big picture—really. Don't sweat the small stuff."

"Take chances. You'll surprise yourself."

"Trust your instincts, always."

"Keep a journal. It's nice to have stories to tell your grandchildren."

"Like yourself. If there's something you don't like, change it!"