



Dave Killen/The Oregonian

Gert Boyle, chairwoman of Columbia Sportswear, in her office.

## Boyle, longtime chairwoman of Columbia Sportswear, dies at 95

By STEVE DUIN  
The Oregonian

Gert Boyle, the longtime chairwoman of Columbia Sportswear and the caustic star of the most memorable advertising campaign in outdoor apparel history, died Sunday morning at the age of 95.

"There would be no Columbia without Gert Boyle," said state Sen. Betsy Johnson D-Scappoose, a longtime friend. "Somewhere along the line, Gert stopped being just another smart, savvy, successful business person, and morphed into an Oregon icon."

A resilient, demanding, charismatic woman in what was long an outdoorsman's world, Boyle ran Columbia Sportswear from 1970 to 1988, firmly establishing the company's brand.

Before her son, Tim, took charge as president and CEO, Gert inspired the 1984 ad campaign, "One Tough Mother," a catch phrase that also graces her 2005 autobiography.

"There are a lot of company leaders who would like to have a book," said Peter Bragdon, Columbia Sportswear's executive vice-president and general counsel.

"There aren't a lot who have a story to tell." Boyle added to the legend at 87 when she foiled a dramatic 2010 invasion of her West Linn home.

When a bush-league kidnapper followed Boyle into her garage with a copy of her book and an impressive replica handgun, demanding money, Boyle had the presence of mind to insist she first needed to disable her home-security system.

Instead, she pressed the silent panic button, summoning police. Boyle ended up with bruises and a bloody lip, but when West Linn's police chief swung by to ask how she was faring, Boyle said, "Everything was okay until you came in with that North Face jacket."

Boyle spent her final half century fighting to outfit everyone in Columbia Sportswear gear, even if that meant posing with a Windwear jacket while her son, Tim, quipped: "Unlike our chairman, it's uncomplicated and lightweight."

And not nearly as funny. "She put her heart on a plate and she had a wicked tongue," said Oregon Gov. Kate Brown.

When Boyle moved to Mirabella, the Portland retirement community, following the kidnapping attempt, she forever groused about the age of the neighbors.

Heck, Johnson says: "She was the only person at the retirement home with a full-time job." She never quit going to work because she knew it brought out the best in her.

"I come in early," Boyle once said, "and verbally abuse as many people as I can find."

Kerry Tymchuk, her autobiography's co-author and the executive director of the Oregon Historical Society, was once driving Boyle and two friends — Antoinette Hatfield and Kathy Duncan — downtown when Boyle asked her companions if either had read, "Fifty Shades of Grey."

Neither had skimmed the erotic schlock, so Boyle asked Tymchuk for a quick book review. In the hush that followed, Boyle quipped, "Hell, I'm 91. Can't do it. Might as well read about it."

Born in Augsburg, Germany, Boyle had just turned 9 when Adolf Hitler came to power and Nazis scrawled "Jews live here" on the wooden siding of the Lamfrom home.

Most of her family fled Germany in 1937. Six decades passed before Boyle could abide a return. When a reporter asked if the Augsburg homecoming made her nostalgic, Boyle said, "Don't you remember history? The last time I was here, people were trying to kill my family."

Several months after the Lamfroms arrived in Portland, her father, a long-time clothier, bought the Rosenfeld Hat Company and changed its name to "Columbia Hat Company." After a tedious summer or two on the hat-box assembly line, Boyle was delighted to escape to the University of Arizona, where she met her future husband, Neal.

They were introduced, Boyle concedes in

"One Tough Mother," when both were blitzed and parked under a table at a Sigma Nu frat party. When they realized they were equally compatible when sober, they married in 1948. Neal went to work for Gert's father while she kept pace with their three children.

Her world pivoted on the December morning in 1970 when Neal's heart failed.

Gert and Tim, a senior at the University of Oregon, were suddenly charged with running a family business they knew little about.

"It was the blind leading the blind, frankly," Tim Boyle says. "We both started firing people who were critical. That probably wasn't a good idea."

As the bad ideas piled up, sales plunged 30%. The bank threatened to withdraw Columbia's line of credit. Gert and Tim Boyle were poised to sell the company until the potential buyer tried to nickel-and-dime her at closing.

Gert cussed. Gert raged. Gert booted the putz from her office. When her back was to the wall, Gert was at her least complicated, trusting in her chutzpah and stubborn resolve.

Columbia Sportswear had \$600,000 in sales in 1971, the year following Neal Boyle's death. It recorded net sales of \$2.47 billion in 2017. Gert's shares in the company were worth nearly \$900 million in 2018, making her one of the wealthiest Oregonians.

"The world might never have known her talents but for the fact that her husband died so young," Brown says. "She never gave up. She represents what I think when I think about Oregon: We are mavericks, innovators, creators."

Boyle was the first woman inducted into the Sporting Goods Association Hall of Fame, but she wasn't an early fan of Bill Borders' brilliant "One Tough Mother" campaign.

She loved the spot where she drove a Zamboni across a rink with her son encased in the ice below, but she wasn't convinced a male-dominated audience would appreciate glamour shots and such taglines as:

"My Mother Makes Combat Boots.  
Overbearing tyrant. It has a nice ring to it. She'll gladly retire when hell freezes over, but that's when we'll need her the most.

Hall-of-Fame moments, it turns out. All of 'em."

She was too busy raising a family and resurrecting a Fortune 1000 company to obsess on gender, Boyle writes, but she discovered "that some of the skills I learned as a mother and in running a household were very transferable to the work place — skills like urging people to get along with each other, and not spending money unless you have it."

Once she had it, Boyle donated \$100 million to the Knight Cancer Institute at Oregon Health & Science University.

"She threw down the gloves on the big boys," Johnson said. "I knew she was thinking about doing it anonymously, but she didn't want Warren Buffet getting credit for her \$100 million gift."

After Boyle, her identity leaked, came forward, OHSU

renamed a research center after her sister, biochemist Hildegard Lamfrom, who died of brain cancer.

Dr. Brian Druker, director of the Knight Institute, said of Gert, "She told me she gave what she could, the same as thousands of others who contributed, and didn't think she was entitled to more praise than anyone else."

"She said, 'I think if someone said to you, 'Would you like to leave a legacy behind?' what better way to help mankind?' She has left a remarkable legacy in many, many ways, and we will miss her ... but never forget her."

Columbia said mourners could make a donation to the Knight Institute in lieu of sending flowers.

The company also said it would announce plans for a celebration of life in the coming days.

Boyle is survived by her son, Tim, and two daughters, Sally Bany and Kathy Deggendorfer; her younger sister, Eva Labby; five grandchildren; the 5,300 employees at Columbia Sportswear, and one star-struck Zamboni.

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