

Leaving on Her Own Terms

Ginger Bremberg Has Decided 12 Years of Shaking Up City Hall Is Enough

GLENDALE

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Early on, Ginger Bremberg liked to tell the story of the "scurvy elephant." It had to do with a little boy who came home crying from Sunday school one day and told his mom that his teacher had called him a "scurvy elephant."

When confronted by the angry mother, the teacher explained that she had said, "disturbing element."

Bremberg told that story when she first was elected to the Glendale City Council in 1981 as a fighter for homeowner rights, restraint in redevelopment and protection of the city's hillsides.

For the past 12 years, Bremberg has relished living up to the role of the little boy, which she admits she played "with glee and malice aforethought."

Bremberg has been adept at tossing a monkey wrench, with unwavering obstinacy, into the otherwise smooth-sailing politics of conservative Glendale. But that role is ending. At age 67, Virginia W. Bremberg is getting out of politics.

"Twelve years is enough," she said in a recent interview.

Bremberg said she promised her husband four years ago that she would quit when her third term ends April 12. She said she

kept her decision secret until the opening of candidate nominations Jan. 7 because "I wanted to see who would come out of the woodwork."

Despite her 4-foot-10 stature, Bremberg has packed a powerful punch in her political career. She speaks with a sharp tongue and is not easily intimidated.

"I basically like her straightforward, no B.S. approach," veteran Glendale developer John Gregg once told The Times. "She says what she believes and doesn't mince her words."

But Bremberg also has shown an uncanny ability to stick her foot in her mouth.

In 1984, she caused a major brouhaha when she criticized Olympic boxing medal winner Hector Lopez, who lived and trained in Glendale, for representing Mexico in the Los Angeles Summer Games. Bremberg publicly chastised Lopez because he was not a U.S. citizen, although he had applied. She said the then 17-year-old bantamweight, who won a silver medal, had "brought no honor to the city of Glendale by wearing a sombrero and waving the Mexican flag as he ran around."

The remarks triggered an outcry from the Latino community, which accused Bremberg of bigotry. Bremberg eventually backed off and was present when the council unanimously bestowed honors on Lopez and three other

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IRFAN KHAN / Los Angeles Times

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GINGER BREMBERG

Retiring Glendale city councilwoman, pictured below

Ginger Bremberg says she will remain politically active after leaving office. She plans to retain her seat on a countywide waste management task force.



BREMBERG: She's Always Spoken Her Mind

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Olympic medal winners from Glendale: high jumper Dwight Stones, skeet shooter Nuria Sherman Ortiz and pistol shooter Don Nygord.

Bremberg said she has put details of her tactical slips out of memory, although she admits there were many.

"I didn't always fix it either," she said. "I just remember feeling incredibly embarrassed, because I had goofed again."

She has an inscribed tile magnet on her refrigerator—a gift from her husband—that reminds her to think before she speaks.

But it is Bremberg's candid personality that has endeared her to many and labeled her as Enemy No. 1 to others. She has never been afraid to stand up for her beliefs, however unpopular. And supporters and opponents alike credit Bremberg for her tenacious research before making a decision.

"She digs into things and does her homework," said Aulden Schlatter, executive vice president of the Chamber of Commerce.

Bremberg estimates she spends about 65 hours a week on city business and keeps regular City Hall hours when not at political functions. Her home phone is listed and she says she has not minded calls at odd hours about barking dogs, potholes and a variety of other nuisance complaints.

Bremberg was a member of President Reagan's National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation from 1984 to 1988. She also has championed saving historic Glendale sites.

But Bremberg disappointed many preservationists last year when she sided with the council majority to demolish the 64-year-old Public Services Building on North Glendale Avenue. "Just because it's old doesn't mean it's good," she said. "If it was ugly in the first place, it doesn't get any better with age."

Critics accused her of not caring about historic places, a charge Bremberg said "really made me angry." Bremberg said she has been "bothered for 12 years" by what she calls "single-issue people whom I have never seen before and will never see again. They only complain when an issue affects their neighborhood or particular field of interest. . . . They pretend they are interested in the whole city. But the city, from where I sit, has 190,000 people who all have different interests."

Bremberg said she is concerned that it seems many of the candidates seeking to replace her are running on a single issue.

She lost her first bid for the council in 1979 as a champion of homeowner rights, then was the leading vote-getter in succeeding elections in 1981, 1985 and 1989. She served three terms as mayor—a largely ceremonial post—in 1983-84, 1987-88 and 1991-92.

Most of Bremberg's opponents decline to voice their opinions publicly because they know the sting of her wrath.

In her second term as mayor, she exchanged verbal fisticuffs in 1988 with former Burbank Mayor Mary Lou Howard over operation of the Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena Airport. Howard, an airport commissioner, took offense at Bremberg's comment that Burbank officials had "groveled" for help from Glendale to keep the airport alive in 1978.

Fellow commissioners attempted to diffuse Howard's anger by suggesting the media misquoted Bremberg. But Howard snapped back: "No. I know the mayor of Glendale, and I can just imagine her making that statement."

Bremberg justified her comment by explaining, "In the thesaurus, grovel is another word for beg, and beg is another word for grovel, and that's what they did."

Colorful use of the language has made Bremberg one of Glendale's most often-quoted leaders. She refers to what she considers to be misguided rabble-rousers as "merry villagers" and uses terms like "silly billy" and "getting diddled."

In addition to Burbank, she frequently takes potshots at other neighboring cities, including Los Angeles and Pasadena. She once suggested that Glendale buy the long-delayed downtown Burbank redevelopment project as a parking lot for Glendale's successful Galleria shopping mall.

Bremberg is particularly proud of her fight with Los Angeles in which she succeeded in banning Los Angeles trash haulers from dumping any more refuse at Scholl Canyon, thus extending the life of Glendale's only landfill.

She described her opposition to the sale of liquor at gas stations as "filling up both tanks." She sometimes pledges her determination with the phrase: "I'm not going to curl up my toes and quit yapping and screaming about it."

One council colleague, Larry Zarian, cut short a vacation in Mexico in 1987 at Bremberg's insistence because she needed his vote to break a deadlock on an important ordinance about to expire. The year-old law created the city's boards that review the design of apartment and commercial buildings. Bremberg was unable to budge former Councilman John F. Day from his opposition to the boards, so she tracked down Zarian and the required four-fifths vote was tallied just before the deadline.

But Bremberg also has shown an ability to compromise.

In 1986, she cast the swing vote approving the giant 588-unit Rancho San Rafael development in the hills, the largest ever approved in Glendale. Bremberg said she stayed awake nights for a week before making up her mind. She ultimately decided that the need for housing for young families was more important than objections to cutting a road through a prominent ridge line—one of her pet peeves.

Bremberg also boasts of the key role she played in the city's adoption of ordinances

restricting video arcades, new laws for fire-proofing homes and businesses and downzoning the city to limit growth.

As president of the Los Angeles County Division of the League of California Cities, Bremberg championed cities' rights to home rule.

She lobbied hard in Sacramento for state grants to preserve wilderness areas and establish parks and worked with other council members to win priority for Glendale for a proposed light-rail system and other transportation improvements.

Bremberg said she hopes one of her last duties will be to help establish new guidelines for hillside development, an issue since she first campaigned for a council seat. Protection of the hillsides is "a dream I have had," she said.

A council hearing on a proposed hillside development ordinance is set for March 2 at 6 p.m.

A career volunteer and self-proclaimed "professional gadfly," Bremberg vows to remain active in the community. She plans to retain her appointed seat on a countywide waste management task force and may volunteer at the library.

But after a lifelong career of political activism and raising two sons, Chuck and Blair, Bremberg said she has become more content to just curl up in a chair, her two dogs at her feet, and read a mystery novel or a historical biography.

"I like a good mystery," Bremberg said. "I like vulgarity and I don't mind violence. It's a wonderful escape from life as I know it."

Life, as Bremberg knows it, includes growing up at Lake Shetek in southwest Minnesota, where her father was a country doctor. Every summer, Bremberg and her family return there to vacation.

She earned a degree in political science at Beloit College, a non-sectarian liberal arts campus in Wisconsin.

Her husband, Bruce, a retired electrical engineer, was in the Navy when they met in 1951. His career steered the family to many homes—including Texas, Georgia and Illinois—before they settled in Chevy Chase Canyon 20 years ago.

In her first successful bid for public office, Bremberg stressed the importance of government's role in providing fundamental services to the citizens—police and fire protection, streets, curbs, gutters and libraries.

Lately, she feels "out of step with the majority" of her colleagues. She stubbornly, but unsuccessfully, fought recent council action to help combat the economic woes of the 1990s by subsidizing business and new homeownership with taxpayers' dollars.

"If that's the way they want to go, then that's the trend," Bremberg said. "I'm too old fashioned to go along."

The "scurvy elephant" is leaving the circus.