

# How a school teacher SAVED KANSAS CITY

**W**HEN CAROL MARINOVICH BECAME mayor of Kansas City, Kansas, it was a ghetto with little going for it except a name easily mistaken for Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO), a larger, more-sophisticated, wealthier city across the river.

Then Marinovich orchestrated a miracle of almost unprecedented proportions in modern American politics. Long the armpit of greater Kansas City, KCK evolved into a development magnet drawing sports complexes, office buildings, retail centers and hotels from around the country. Recently, Citibank, a major funder of Marinovich's efforts, launched a national advertising campaign around her. "People couldn't wait to get out of Kansas City, Ks. – not anymore," Marinovich says in a Citi ad on *W Magazine's* back cover.

The Marinovich story could be used to show the potential power of ordinary citizens; she was a schoolteacher for a quarter century before entering local politics. Or it could be used to show the difference a woman can make in a traditionally male environment. Marinovich was the first woman elected to the KCK City Council.

But in a recent interview in a fancy coffee shop on a once-dead block of KCK, Marinovich said the most inspiring and relevant aspect of the story is the larger cast of characters who played significant roles. Humility is what you'd expect of the retired mayor, a college professor now who notes that she gave all proceeds from the Citi ad to charity.

Yet actually she has a point. Has America – or the world – ever been hungrier for a demonstration of what rival political parties can achieve when they work together? A lifelong Democrat, Marinovich recalls that the so-called Democratic Machine in KCK largely opposed her strategy for revitalizing the city. "All the crucial help came from moderate Republicans," she says.

When Marinovich became KCK mayor in 1995, financial problems plagued not only the city but also the larger jurisdiction where it sat, Wyandotte County. Marinovich's idea – to merge the city and county governments, eliminating duplicated services – required more than voter approval.

Former mayor  
**CAROL  
MARINOVICH**  
tells Brunswick's  
**KEVIN HELLIKER**  
about her  
campaign to  
revitalize a  
forgotten city



It required the blessing of the state legislature before it could even land on a ballot. In the state legislature in Topeka, the fiercest opposition to the proposal came from Marinovich's fellow Wyandotte County Democrats. Only with the help of Republican Governor Bill Graves and the Republican President of the State Senate, Richard L. Bond, did Marinovich win approval to ask Wyandotte County voters to approve a unification of the city and county governments. In a blue-collar community where political leadership always had been male, Marinovich and her campaign persuaded a large majority of voters to approve consolidation.

Once the city and county governments merged, her next step involved marketing a city known mainly for crime, smokestacks and a declining population. While greater Kansas City had grown dramatically to the east, north and south, to the west

there was the ghetto known as KCK – and then prairie.

In fact, the prairie was relatively close to downtown KCMO. What if Marinovich marketed that prairie as close to the heart of KCMO – but with a green buffer between it and inner-city KCK? The tax and job benefits could be used to rejuvenate its inner city. Because this plan would rely on offering tax incentives to developers, it also required state approval. Once again, Marinovich relied mostly on moderate Republicans in the Kansas Legislature.

Today, Wyandotte County remains staunchly Democratic. Of the 105

counties in Kansas, only Wyandotte and one other voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election. But today, virtually every Democrat in KCK/ Wyandotte County takes pride in a revitalization that would never have happened if not for Marinovich and a large band of Republicans. "Wouldn't it be nice if things worked that way in Washington?" Marinovich asks.

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