

Mary Elizabeth Preston GFWC President 1978-1980

Raised in eastern Kentucky, orphaned at 16 and married two years later to an older man who thought women should not work, Mary Elizabeth Preston ended up a White House aide and friend to presidents.

"It's only in the United States of America that something like this could happen," Preston said, "where an insignificant hillbilly could have such a wonderful life."

A gracious and petite woman, Preston again walked through the White House, where she served for seven years as President Ronald Reagan's liaison to national social service and volunteer groups.

"I was very emotionally stirred," she said of her return. "I never walked those halls and didn't feel that I was walking on hallowed ground."

Preston was raised in Pikeville, Ky., where descendants of the feuding Hatfields and McCoys hold their reunion. Her father died in an auto accident when she was 14. Two years later, her mother died from pneumonia.

Preston took on the job of caring for her brother and four sisters and was soon married to a successful businessman with considerable land holdings. They tried to have children. But despite prayer and visits to doctors, Preston never became pregnant.

Desperate to be near kids, she joined the Pikeville Women's Club, which supported youth programs. Her husband approved. It was volunteer work, not a job.

Preston would go on to make a career of volunteering. She sat on a host of state boards, became president of the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs and finally, from 1978 to 1980, was president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

The international service organization has headquarters in downtown Washington, just blocks from the White House.

In her work, Preston stressed what she calls the "privileges and responsibilities of freedom," which she argues are impossible to enjoy without a strong free enterprise system and traditional family values.

Preston caught Reagan's eye.

Instead of heading back to Kentucky or her vacation home in Florida after finishing her two-year term as head of the federation, Preston bought a house in McLean, Va., and assumed the role of special assistant to the president.

"He was the kindest and most understanding person you could ever hope to know," she said of Reagan.

Feeling she had served her country and wanting to be near family, Preston moved to Florida after seven years. She soon left the east coast because of its congestion and settled in Apollo Beach, near Tampa.

When that area also became too crowded for her taste, Preston moved to her home near Brooksville in 2001. She lives there with her second husband, Bill. Her first husband died in 1978.

She and Bill have been married for 14 years. They met while Preston was president of the Family Motor Coach Association's singles club. Motor coaches are one of Preston's loves, and she is now the Family Motor Coach Association's constitution and bylaws chairwoman.

She's helping to organize the association's Southeast Area rally, which will have a "Nifty Fifties" theme during its annual run this week at the Hernando County Airport. Preston also is involved in the Brooksville Woman's Club, the county Child Advocacy Council and is an alternate on the county Planning and Zoning Commission.

Preston did not want her age printed, but said she is old enough to have the leisure time to pursue what she enjoys: going to women's club meetings and motor coach rallies.

When she returned to Washington for the inauguration this month, she averaged three parties a night and celebrated the election victory of a leader she says will become a legend because of his fight for freedom.

For too long, America has been plagued by decadence and an "anything goes" attitude, Preston said. But there has been a backlash against such nonsense, Preston said, and Bush's victory is evidence of that.

Her home is decorated with Asian art and gifts from Chinese and Korean leaders. Preston visited those countries and many others to promote the creation of women's clubs. Next to the Ming vase and a miniature silver replica of a Chinese warship, there's a small porcelain Madonna.

It was given to Preston when she gave her first speech at the Pikeville Women's Club.

"I wouldn't give that up for anything in the world," she said