

Elizabeth Villa Gibbs

Biography

Elizabeth (Tish) Gibbs has enjoyed a long and productive career in community service. After graduating from Wheaton College in Massachusetts in 1957, she worked as a staff writer for Good Housekeeping Magazine before retiring to bring up her two sons.

When she moved to Connecticut in 1964, she joined the League of Women Voters and worked with a team on a study of solid waste which led her to connect with CCAG supporting many iterations of the bottle bill. She also joined forces with Bill Collins in 1971 who had organized the Norwalk Environmental Action Team to collect recyclable paper, glass and cans door to door. This led to her appointment by Mayor Donald Irwin as Chair of Norwalk's Recycling Program.

In 1973, Tish was elected as a Democrat to the Norwalk City Council and in 1976, after a bruising series of Democratic Primaries, Tish was elected Chair of the Norwalk Democratic Town Committee, ousting a 24-year party boss. She then managed four successful Mayoral Campaigns (and one unsuccessful one) for Bill Collins. Collins appointed her City Clerk in 1977 and she served in that position until 1981. She was Democratic State Central Committeewoman from 1978 to 1990.

Tish was appointed to the Board of Director of the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk in 1985 where she served until 2002 when she stepped down to accept an appointment to the Maritime Aquarium Authority. During this time Tish was also named to the boards of the Norwalk Human Services Council, Literacy Volunteers and Keystone House.

In 1985, Tish was hired as Grants Coordinator at Norwalk Community College where she spent the next 15 years helping to build NCC into one of the state's leading community colleges.

In 1986, Tish and Bill visited Nicaragua as part of a fact finding tour for elected officials during the illegal Contra War sponsored by the Reagan administration. She was so affected by the conditions she found there that she joined the Norwalk/Nagarote Sister City Project, a partnership for sustainable community development between the people of Nagarote, Nicaragua and the Greater Norwalk Area of Connecticut. She soon became Treasurer and later Co-Chair. In 2000, when she retired from Norwalk Community College, she agreed to become the unpaid Executive Director of the Project and has just retired from that full-time job at the age of 83.

During her tenure, the project began addressing the needs of Nagarote's most disadvantaged children providing afterschool programs for teens, encouraging community service, and developing leadership skills. As a result, teen gangs were eliminated and teen pregnancies were greatly reduced in the barrios where the Project worked. The Project now has a full-time bi-lingual Nicaraguan Field Director as well as a staff of 20 based in Nagarote. In 2011, they built a community center and this year they built their own preschool on their campus. Hundreds of children have completed school with their scholarships and many have continued on to college although most of their parents never finished sixth grade. In the last election in Nagarote, both candidates for Mayor were graduates of the Norwalk Project's programs.

In light of the current political unrest in Nicaragua, Tish hastens to point out that the Project has never applied for or accepted funding from the U.S. government and has worked cooperatively with various political leaders in Nagarote over the past 32 years.