

# PEORIA COUNTY BOARD MEMBER ZAN RANSBURG

photo by Delayne Spain Photography



Alexandra (Zan) Ransburg, Peoria County Board member since 1990, was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but grew up in Indianapolis, and attended Butler University, majoring in business. She then went to work for the United

States Department of Foreign Service, with assignments taking her to Washington, D.C. and Frankfurt, Germany.

In 1964 she married David P. Ransburg, currently owner of Peoria's L.R. Nelson Corporation, and Peoria City Councilman from the Fifth District. Zan says she and Dave waited 24 years to find the home they wanted with a view of the Illinois River. When they purchased their

home about three years ago, both enjoyed the renovation and decorating to reflect their tastes. Zan enjoys traveling, golf, tennis, and designing needlepoint and knitting. She speaks passionately about her children, David Jr., 29, who lives in Peoria and will attend Kellogg Graduate School in the Fall to pursue his MBA; and Emily, age 25, currently living and working in Atlanta.



**What led to your work with the Foreign Service and the time you spent overseas?**

My aunt and uncle lived in Italy, as well as my elderly grandmother, when I was in college. I wanted to see her and someone told me about one opportunity to see Europe — the Department of Foreign Service. I applied and was accepted for a secretarial position.

I first went to Washington, D.C. for six months of training. Then I was transferred to Frankfurt to work in the office of Security. It was a top secret area, very interesting, and a great learning experience for me. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away before I actually went to Europe, but I did work in Germany for about two years. As a result of that, I always thought, if I had a daughter of my own, I would encourage her to go out on her own and see the world before she got married.

**When did you meet your husband and how did you arrive in Peoria?**

I came back to Indianapolis and worked as a legal secretary at an Indianapolis law firm. Several people kept telling Dave, who worked for IBM at the time, to ask me out on a date.

Dave asked me out in May and we decided we didn't have anything in common! But we somehow continued to date, and were ultimately married — on "leap day" in February, 1964. So we really celebrate our anniversary every four years. Ironically, we attended the same high school even though he was a year behind me.

After we got married, we lived in Indianapolis about two years while Dave was with IBM and a small aircraft research and development company. Then he went to Harvard Business School when David Jr. was about a year old. He spent two years in school, then went to work in New York City, living in Tarrytown, New York and then Boston. Then he decided to look for a business to buy.

Bart Nelson was a fraternity brother of Dave's when he was at Purdue University, and also the best man in our wedding. His family was selling their company, L. R. Nelson, and we decided to buy it. We came to Peoria in 1972 when Emily was two years old.

**I** have always thought it was important to give back to the community and had volunteered for service groups, but wasn't sure politics was the direction I wanted to go at that time.

**After your children were born, you stayed at home, doing volunteer work. What were some of the volunteer efforts you chose?**

When we lived in Boston, I got very involved in Junior League activities. After we moved here, I continued my Junior League activities, but I also got involved with Lakeview Museum, Methodist Service League, Kellar School PTO Board, Channel 47, the United Way, American Red Cross, and the Symphony Guild. I also became active in various political campaigns.

When Emily was older, I traveled a lot with her. At the time, she was a nationally ranked tennis player.

**You have had some major health problems over the past few years. Have those situations changed your perspective in any way?**

I had two knee problems, and I had my hip replaced in October. It's over now; my surgery was very successful and I hope to be back playing tennis in a couple of weeks. I play golf, do low-impact aerobics, enjoy water exercises and ride a bike. I'm blessed to be able to do all the things I want to do. My condition is not a degenerative one, and there are no signs of problems with my other hip.

I was able to keep up with my work while recuperating; I think I only missed two county board meetings. I did go to a couple of meetings in my wheel chair and on crutches, but I had the support of great County Board friends and family members who would drive me to meetings. I learned a lot about myself, my friends, and my family while going through the surgeries. It makes me realize how lucky I am to be able to walk down the street. A lot of things I used to take for granted, I don't anymore.

**You have been a Peoria County Board member since 1990. When did**

**your interest in politics begin?**

When I looked into my family history, I discovered they came from Germany and settled in Indiana. My great-grandfather, in the late 1880s, was not only treasurer of Indiana, but was a potential appointee to the position of U.S. treasurer under President Harrison. Unfortunately, he died before he could fill that post. My grandfather and a cousin both served as treasurer of Indiana. So there's a little political background.

Dave has always been more interested in politics than I have been. After Emily went to college, we were at a fund-raiser for Dave Leitch in October at the Cater Inn. Bart Rochman and Skip Snyder came to me and asked me to consider running for Peoria County Board. I have to admit I had no clue what they were talking about! In less than two short months after that conversation, I made the decision to try to run. I have always thought it was important to give back to the community and had volunteered for service groups, but wasn't sure politics was the direction I wanted to go at that time.

People who know me know that when I get involved in something, I get pretty intense. I found out what was required of a County Board member and thought it would be interesting. I had to have my petition in by December. With the help of a great committee, a good grass-roots campaign and hard work, I won.

**How did you campaign in that first primary?**

The most significant thing I did was walk door-to-door every weekend. I probably visited 100-150 homes each weekend, in all kinds of weather. The first door I went to, I remember, happened to be the home of Dick and Sandy Lenz in Deerbrook. I very nervously knocked on the door and introduced myself. It turned out they had been David Jr.'s Sunday



School teachers at First Federated several years ago. That broke the ice.

I'm an extrovert, but it's hard knocking on doors. I know I don't like to be interrupted by someone unexpectedly. But I knew I had a message, and at that time, it was to reduce the size of the County Board. I thought we also needed to have better inter-governmental cooperation, especially with the city. Dave wasn't involved in the Peoria City Council at that time, interestingly enough.

One of my close friends, Mary Ellen DeBord, was in my campaign, and lived across the street from me at the time. She is a very professional, efficient person, and presents a wonderful image. She started sticking catalogs in my mailbox, marking business suits. Finally, I went over to her and said, "Mary Ellen, it's not going to work. I understand what you're trying to say, but I'm not going to change myself. I'm a casual person!"

My entire campaign was a very positive experience. Dave

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was so supportive, and I couldn't have done it without him. When he decided to run for Peoria City Council, I passed on to him what I felt was really helpful to me and that was to go door to door. He thought it was a positive experience as well.

**Have there been conflicts between you and your husband because David serves on the Peoria City Council and you serve on the Peoria County Board?**


No, we don't really discuss details of our meetings. I have been asked about things going on in the city that I often don't know anything about. We talk openly about issues such as the landfill issue, because we are both dealing with it. We do

have differences of opinion, but it hasn't affected either one of us. We are both independent in every way even though we care about each other.

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**How does the Peoria County Board operate? Is it politically charged?**


The County Board tries to operate




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and should operate on a non-partisan level. I think a lot of outside political things have entered the County Board. It is not important, with most issues, which party you belong to. What is important is to work together for the good of our constituents. I've found that I'm able to look at both sides of an issue. I try to build coalitions and learn to work with people from all walks of life. The County Board is made up of people from all districts representing a broad cross section of our community.

As I understand it, the political climate goes through swings. It's too bad we waste our energies on what I consider non-productive issues. I believe in looking at the issues I feel are important to the county, like growth and cooperation with the city. Anyone who espouses the things I think are important, I will vote for.

**Do we need more women in government? How would you encourage more women to seek political office?**

**M**aybe the women who are elected to office should be more pro-active in trying to share experiences and encourage others to run for office. There are potential leaders out there.

We definitely need more women in government. Many people, when approached, are somewhat overwhelmed by the prospect of running a campaign. Something that might help is to tell people why it's important. Not only is it important to give back to the community, but you also learn so much — you get back so much.

I would try to present someone the simple steps about getting started on running a campaign. It is important to stand up for what you believe in; if you feel someone in office is clouding the issues, it's your obligation to try to change things.

Maybe the women who are elected to office should be more pro-active in trying to share experiences and encourage others to run for office. There are potential leaders out there. We need to continue to search and find these people, to let them know what we're doing and that they can

make a difference. It is very important to tap the resources we have in this community of people who are willing to volunteer. They are exciting, have fresh ideas, and need to get involved.

**What kind of a time commitment does your County Board work demand?**

We're committed to a monthly meeting, and I serve on three committees which also meet once or twice a month. There's a lot of background reading to do. I was on the search committee for a new county administrator and the land-fill siting committee, both of which were special committees. I'm a conscientious board member and do research.

**Your husband, David, has now officially announced that he is running for mayor of Peoria. Does this additional**

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exposure concern you? Could his candidacy present some problems for you, especially if he were to be elected?

You can maintain your privacy as a public official. Each of us has control of our lives. I'm probably Dave's biggest supporter and advocate. I think he's exactly what the city needs. There's a sense of excitement to know someone who you feel can make a difference. Peoria is on the brink of some major developments, and Dave has the tools and ability to lead our city. Dave has been deeply involved behind the scenes in several recent successes in inter-governmental relations. I don't see anything changing, in that I would plan to continue with my commitments. If there were ever any indications that it was not appropriate for me to do so, I would listen to arguments to the contrary. I feel if we can both serve the community in any capacity, it's a win-win situation for the community.

**What is your philosophy of political activity?**

I strongly believe politicians need to be accountable for what they say. It is very easy to give a political speech to one group because you know they want to hear it, then go to the council floor, for example, and

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vote in another direction. You can't have it both ways; you have to be held accountable. In my opinion, there should be as many forums and as many debates held for the people of Peoria as possible. It's the voters' duty to listen to all the candidates, then make up their minds which ones are the best candidates. There are many politicians who are wonderful people and give little slap-on-the-back speeches, but their voting records and their positions on the issues are what really count. You can't speak out of both sides of your mouth.

**What are the most pressing needs of Peoria County? What are your current responsibilities on the County Board?**

We cannot solve our juvenile problems at the County Board level, but we need to deal with them, and we are. Our jail expansion and balanced growth in the county

are very important issues. I think the city and county need to work on those issues together in a planned manner. The Riverfront is one of our greatest assets and it's very exciting that we are beginning its development. The continuing commitment of people to stay involved in politics and recruit good people is very important.

Currently, I'm vice chair of the Judicial Committee and also serve on Management Services (which deals with all courthouse facilities, personnel, and the county auditor) and on the Land-use Committee. We are completing our small area plans to integrate into our Comprehensive Land Use Plan, and rewriting our zoning ordinance.

**What do you like about living in Peoria?**

I've always said Peoria is the perfect place to raise a family. Our son went through

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the gifted program in the public school system and ended up going to Stanford; Emily went to Wake Forest College. I don't know how they could have had a better background in preparing them to go to top colleges.

Peoria is small enough that you can be involved in community activities and sports at a level where you can see yourself being successful.

Many visitors think Peoria is in the middle of a corn field until they come here. They are overwhelmingly surprised and pleased by what Peoria has to offer.

**What has given you the most satisfaction in your work on the County Board? In your personal life?**

I feel very satisfied when, after having worked a year or so on a project, I can finally see ideas emerge from committee to public input, and begin to see things happen like our Land Use plan and our Focused Growth Management Plan.

I'm a Peoria County Commissioner to the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission. We are dealing with the Peoria-to-Chicago Highway and the Erosion Control Ordinance.

We all have different opinions on the County Board, but I know that some of my suggestions have made a difference. We now have a no-smoking policy in the courthouse, for example; I was instrumental in encouraging those discussions.

I served on the Health Services Committee for the County, I'm very proud to have been a liaison for the County for the Care and Treatment Board and seeing Allied Agencies development of a comprehensive one-stop pediatric diagnostic treatment center.

I worked very hard when I served on



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the Solid Waste committee, and am very happy with the progress of the four county recycling centers and our commercial recycling ordinance for businesses.

On a personal note, my brother (who lives in Tucson) and my sister (who lives in Cincinnati) and I have made a concerted effort over the years to encourage our children to know each other. As a result,

they have a very close bond. It is very meaningful to me to see they love each other, stay in touch and care about being together whenever possible. Our two children are the most important part of my life. I am so blessed; Dave and our children are my biggest supporters. It's because of my family and friends I have been able to do everything I have done.

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I would like to share with you an essay that my 15-year old granddaughter, Cecilia Ransburg, wrote after my husband, Dave Ransburg, passed away. While her words are explicitly about my husband, they discuss his many actions and underlying philosophy that were shared by me. He and I were a true partnership, and there is no better way to understand me than to read this essay written about him.

Zan Ransburg



Cecilia Ransburg  
October 22, 2018

### Giving a Brown Wall Some Color

At first, the doctors thought it was Parkinson's Disease. His handwriting became smaller, then he couldn't write at all. He used a cane, then a walker, then a wheelchair. His speech was garbled, then he couldn't speak at all. All of the symptoms were consistent with Parkinson's, but he was deteriorating much too quickly for that to be the explanation. It turns out that Parkinson's was not the culprit; it was Multiple System Atrophy, a rare neurological disorder that affects the body's involuntary functions, including blood pressure, breathing, bladder function, and muscle control. These medical terms were just medical terms until they described my grandpa. I saw someone who had been strong in every way, fall apart right before my eyes.

Starting at the beginning of school last year, we drove to Peoria almost every weekend to visit him and my grandma. The care facility that he was in was better than all of the other options, but it was still a depressing place to be. The floors, walls, and even the ceilings were brown. The absence of color was just another reason I wished that I didn't need to go there. I decided to do something about it. I collected colorful paper, paints, photographs, and old drawings. I covered the walls of his room with everything bright I could find. On one wall, I hung up all of the photos I had taken from my photography class, then I sat down and told him the story behind each of the photos. I explained how I cropped them, brightened them, and enhanced them to turn my simple photos into something eye-catching. Then, I taped up the colored paper onto the other wall, and I painted. While the painting itself was no Picasso, it put a smile on his face and on the faces of everyone else in my family. During that time, I didn't see



anyone smile very often, so that was a treat for us all. It was amazing for me to see how my poorly painted mural could brighten their spirits, which it turn, brightened mine.

While I brought color into that dingy room, my grandpa brought color to the whole world. He always was helping others, from running a successful business that brought many jobs to Peoria, to becoming mayor and putting everything he had into making it a better place to live. On a smaller scale, but more importantly to me, he brought so much color into our family. Whenever he came up for a birthday celebration, he would lift me up by my ears and make me feel like a superhero. Every Christmas, my grandma gave him a tiny, wooden puzzle that seemed impossible to solve, but he always solved it. When I wanted to glue the pieces together so everyone could see his accomplishment, we wouldn't do it because the important part to him was getting to put together the puzzle with his family. His family was of utmost importance to him, and he made sure we knew it. Then, just like that, all of the color disappeared on the morning of November 11, 2017, when we learned that he was gone.

A few days later, while writing his obituary with my grandma, I learned something interesting about my grandpa, yet it did not surprise me in the least. When he was growing up, his grandfather instilled in him the philosophy to "leave everything better than when you got there." There was no doubt in my mind that this was the phrase he lived by because it described him perfectly. While thinking about everything he had done throughout his life, it hit me that our time here really is limited so I made a vow to myself in that moment that I would make the most of my time. I can use the time that I have to make something better than it was when I got here. While no color can ever cover up the sad brown wall that was left in my life after he died, I'm working to add color in other ways.



Since November 11, I have jumped at every opportunity to improve myself and make the world a better place. I was selected for the kids' board of a local non-profit, and I was promoted to Vice-President after just a few months. My grandpa was a leader in the community, and now I am in a position where I can use my job as a leader to help others. After I thought more about how time is fleeting, I took a risk. I was scared, but I went to Peru without my family and I got to help people in a rural town in the Andes. This risk paid off more than I expected it would, seeing as how it was one of the most rewarding events of my life. Now I have decided to go to Thailand next summer to teach in the schools. For my grandpa, bringing color into the lives of others brought color into his life, and it is the same for me. Because of him, I will not let my time be wasted. Because of him, I will take risks and travel, learning as much from the rest of the world as I can. Because of him, I will do everything in my power to take every dark, bland, dingy brown wall in the world, and paint each one a bright, beautiful, joyful color.