

# Cheyenne Herald

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## Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah (Heath) Palin has a Wasilla, Alaska high school classmate in Cheyenne. And she's also running for public office!



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by Dave FEATHERLY

We live in what is sometimes an incredibly small world.

Imagine growing up in a small city 42 air miles north of Anchorage, Alaska and waking up to news one morning that a former classmate of yours had been chosen by the presumptive presidential nominee of the Republican Party to be his running mate.

That is exactly the experience of Donna Roofe, a resident of Cheyenne for the past several years.

When we sat down yesterday afternoon to discuss the remarkable coincidences of not only having gone to high school with Sarah (nee Heath) Palin in Wasilla, Alaska, but also being a candidate for public office here in Cheyenne herself, Donna Roofe had only positive things to say about the slightly younger woman she knew as Sarah Heath almost three decades ago in Alaska.

Donna's grandmother "homesteaded" in Anchorage and Donna moved there from Mississippi when she was just a few weeks old. She lived in Anchorage, then Houston (a nearby town of about 500 population whose children were bused to Wasilla for school) all through her school years and first met Sarah Heath when she was a 7th grader and Sarah was a 5th grader. There was no junior high school at the time so those grades went to the same elementary school - Iditarod Elementary. That name, of course, has become world famous for its sled dog race.

During this time, a new junior high school and a new high school were built in Wasilla. Sarah and Donna's classes rejoined when Sarah was a freshman in high school - Donna was then a junior.

Donna's younger brother, Wayne, was in the same grade in school as Sarah and Sarah's older brother, Chuck, was in the same grade as Donna.

*Wasilla has erroneously been referred to by other media as a "suburb" or Anchorage but it is over 40 miles away. Like Wyoming, towns and cities tend to be far apart up there. Familiar cities in Alaska are distant from Wasilla - Juneau is over 800 miles to the southeast and Fairbanks is over 300 miles to the north. There is also some confusion just what the population of Wasilla is now but the 2007 US Census estimate was just under 10,000.*

Donna has been in regular telephone and e-mail contact with Chuck Heath since the selection by John McCain of Sarah Palin to be his running mate, as well as with other former classmates and friends from Wasilla.

*Donna Roofe is a candidate for Cheyenne City Council from Ward 3. She did not approach me about this story. I was tipped that she was a former school friend of Sarah Palin and I asked her if she'd share her memories with me for a story in the Cheyenne Herald. She agreed and I interviewed her for about an hour and a half. I had not previously met Donna, although we have spoken on the phone a couple times, prior to her campaign. I also told Channel 5 of this story and they were to contact her.*

While Donna acknowledged that she and Sarah weren't "best friends," primarily because of the age difference, she told me she knew Sarah "pretty well." She said, in Alaska at that time, you knew everybody and you knew everything about everybody. Unlike Cheyenne today, chances are Alaska was not a transient haven. Families settled there and stayed in place, kids growing up together, completing school together, then often remaining in the town of their school or nearby. Small town families more often remain in the same zip code than do urban families who tend to move often.

Described by many as a remote hamlet, Donna said there were 175-200 in her graduating class in Wasilla. That's not exactly West Nowhere, USA. There was another nearby town in "the Valley," Palmer, that also had a high school. The two high schools were rivals and, when asked what kind of team Wasilla had when Sarah "Barracuda" Heath played, Donna said simply, "we beat Palmer." In small schools and rural areas, the year's success is often measured by the outcome of games against the bitter rival.

As a typical example of what happens in these small schools, Donna's parents moved to Sutton when she would have been a senior. That move put her in the Palmer school district and she would not attend the school that she had grown to consider the rival. She wanted to finish high school in Wasilla but had no place to live there so she finished her high school education through GED and continued to frequent the Wasilla high school and maintain her friendships there.

Donna described both Sarah and Chuck Heath as very good athletes. Sarah has become known through the media as a tenacious player and Donna agreed with that assessment. You don't get the nickname "Barracuda" by playing "soft" or being afraid.

Donna has continued to "go home" over the years she has lived away from Alaska. Wasilla is her "home" and she attends class reunions there and maintains contacts with her Wasilla friends, including Sarah's older brother. He is a school teacher in Anchorage as is Donna's younger brother's wife. Small towns, remote areas and rural communities have a hold on those who grew up there. So often, they don't seek the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow - they are content to grow old among those they were once young with. They are a special quality of people.

Sarah's family was headed to St. Paul as Donna and I spoke this Tuesday afternoon. Chuck described the last few days as "a whirlwind" of activity. Both of Sarah's parents are alive and remain in Wasilla and will be in St. Paul. Sarah has been able to live in her own home in Wasilla and commute to her job as Alaska Governor.

When asked what else she knew about Sarah Heath from their school days together, Donna quickly replied: "She was genuine." Also, "she always spoke her mind." High praise, indeed. In politics, too many become a different person to garner votes - they are not genuine. And, they speak someone else's mind, not their own. In Cheyenne, that would be the "mind" of the WT-E, to curry and retain favor. Give me the Sarah Palins. Any day.

Both the Heath and Bell (Donna Roofe's maiden name) families were "strong Christian families," according to Donna. Back then, Bible studies were allowed in public school. Donna wasn't sure what church Sarah attended but thought it was nondenominational, as was her own family's. But, Sarah was a "good Christian."

"All of us were just blown away. Everyone from our class." So describes the reaction to John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin to be his running mate, as told to me by Donna Roofe. Everything Donna Roofe has heard from friends of hers in Alaska and friends of Sarah Palin in Alaska, has been positive and supportive. Sarah Palin has been a very popular governor, with approval ratings as high as 90%. Donna said her father and his generation have been very pleased with the "clean-up" made in government by Sarah since becoming governor and are excited about the possibility of her becoming vice president. No one doubts she is up to the task. Her promise to "get rid of the good old boys" has been met and she is popular because of that. She's still "the Barracuda."

Attractive but tough, Sarah Palin will surprise. When asked how he thought Palin would do as vice president, one close to Donna Roofe offered: "Look at the people who crossed her. Just watch the body count." Said jokingly, it is an indication that this former beauty queen has the toughness to play in Washington, D.C.

The truth about someone often comes from those with whom they went to school. This woman who was suddenly thrust on the national stage is passing all tests. She is well-liked, respected and highly regarded.

Can she take over if elected and something happens to John McCain? Be reminded that Harry S Truman served only 82 days as vice president before Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. During that brief time, Roosevelt was at Yalta making plans for postwar Germany. During those four score plus two days, Truman met briefly with FDR but twice. Truman had no knowledge of what the plans were for the conduct of the war (World War II) nor plans for peace. He was in the dark when he became president. In recent elections, the name of Harry S Truman has been used more often than God. He did the job.

If the need should arise, her friends think Sarah Palin could step into the breach as Harry S Truman did.