

# Climbing Up the Stairs For Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

By VIRGINIA GARDNER

CLIMBING UP and down stairs on the Lower East Side getting signatures for Elizabeth Gurley Flynn on four evenings and one afternoon, has offered a variety of experiences. Not only is the getting of each signature a drama in itself, never repeated exactly, but each evening, each house, seems different.

Two rules, however, seem justified, by my own experience and what others said of theirs:

1.—If you have been out knocking on doors only one night, don't feel too elated if you fared unusually well; and don't feel discouraged if you didn't fulfill your own idea of a good canvasser.

2.—If you only see enough people, you can get signatures. Said in another way, what is lacking so far isn't the people; there are ample people on the Lower East Side to provide 3,000 valid signatures required to put Gurley Flynn on the ballot to represent the district on the City Council. What is lacking so far is enough canvassers.

It is estimated that fully 10 times as many canvassers as have been working the first two weeks will be needed to seek out the thousands who are willing to express their democratic rights to put an independent on the ballot.

In the Flynn campaign in the Bronx in 1954, when more than 4,000 signatures were obtained to qualify Gurley Flynn for the ballot to run for Congress, teams of two averaged one and one-half signatures a night, according to the People's Rights Party group, which is planning to place the Communist leader's name on the ballot this year for City Council member.

The two-member teams, each different, in which I took part on four occasions, and my efforts going out alone one evening when I arrived late, gave a total of 24. Singly the efforts ranged from one to nine. Some teams did better, some worse, I learned; ours were about average for the total.

The first evening, accompanied by a man with a patient, professorial manner, we walked past the streets which had become familiar to me while writing a series on the Rosenbergs—Clinton, Ridge, Suffolk, Rivington. Lost in thought I walked past Clinton, our stop, and we had to retrace our steps. When we finally reached our first house it was after 7:30.

We had beginners' luck. Four out of the first six persons we spoke to signed. This was now just past 8 p.m. But in the next 65 minutes we got not one signature. "What happened?" I asked him as we trudged back, feeling like failures. "How come we didn't get a single one in the last two houses?"

"Virginia," he said, "you talk too much—and too long. You should say a little—then wait for their questions."

"Isn't that like a man?" I said heatedly. "You let me do all the talking and then tell me what's wrong. Why didn't you tell me sooner then?"

But then I remembered an experience in California, when the signature ordeal was on to put the Independent Progressive Party on the ballot. I had spent an afternoon with some local champion signature getter who in order to give me a better story had let me lapse into lengthy question and answer. We had some fine discussions which made good copy but after the story was printed, a determined lady in charge of the campaign speeches to campaign workers,



ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN

to denounce my story. The idea, she said, was to see as many people as possible, not engage in long debates or arguments, however interesting. There just wasn't time.

"I guess you're right," I told my critic now, as we sat over sodas on the way back to headquarters, then at 111 E. Houston. "I loved talking to that lovely Puerto Rican mother of seven and hearing her bright 12-year-old son translate, and to that charming young Chinese man who didn't feel he should sign without asking his father. But I did spend a lot of time with them."

"Yes," he said patiently, "and it's not wasted. But if we want to get Elizabeth on the ballot we have to cover a lot of territory, each one of us."

That was the opening night of the campaign, a Thursday. I came in again on a Monday, and was assigned a Jewish mother with a radiant smile, who spoke Yiddish and English equally well. As on the first night, it took us half an hour to walk from campaign headquarters to our first apartment house.

Up and down stairs we went, in tenements much like my own, farther north on the East Side, with this difference: they were as crumbling on the outside, but within, through ingenuity and hard work, interiors shone brightly with new paint, linoleum, pleated skirts for the tubs in the kitchen, usually holding a child taking a bath.

Possibly because of my partner's smile, or because I profited by my patient and sensible critic of the first evening, we obtained eight signatures in just one and one-half hours. One house we picked cold when the house we were looking for had been torn down and we were at an end of our registered voters' lists.

From top to bottom we went. It was a better-than-average building, with an elevator. People were cautious about coming to the door. It was getting late at night. "Just for luck," I said as we returned to the first floor, still untried, "let's try here." A young woman let us in.

I was so convinced it would be another refusal that I began, "Did you ever hear of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn?" and when she nodded, said, "She wants to run for City Council. You know she's a Communist?"

The young woman shrugged. "So, what if she is?" she asked.

It was only when we were outside that we realized that, astonished at the ease and speed of that fourth signature, we had not thought to ask her husband to sign.

Now, with litig spirits, we

tried another house cold, asking at the door, "Any registered voters here?" and despite the late hour found three signers on the first floors. In one kitchen, a mother-in-law objected in Spanish and a younger woman said, after hearing us and reading a leaflet in Spanish, perhaps she shouldn't. It was quite evident she wanted to. Just as we arose to leave the husband came in, his arms loaded with groceries.

He sat down, next to his wife, and we went through our story and he looked at the leaflet. No, he said politely, sorrowfully, he would not sign. Then, a soft hand on his arm, her face dimpling and imploring, but smiling saucily, she spoke to him in Spanish. "Si," he said, and, turning to us, said with a certain pride in his generosity, "She can sign if she wants."

She did want—and the mother-in-law looked on with disapproval, but in silence, as she signed. We left, not quite certain whether it was primarily a victory for free speech and the independent ballot and the right of Communists to bring their message to their fellowman, or a victory for liberated wives, or simply for youth over age. But whichever it was, I felt sure Elizabeth Gurley Flynn would approve.

As I was still toiling up the last stairs to the top floor my partner had springily ascended and already was knocking on a door at the rear. When I reached her she was speaking easily in Yiddish. Standing before us was a little aged man with a long flowing beard and, rather incongruous beneath a big wide-brimmed black felt hat almost like a sombrero, a saint-like face, placid, gentle eyed and without a wrinkle. In the background a woman moved softly, her face impassive beneath coils of braided red hair. On a chair nearby lay a stack of Jewish Day newspapers.

The old gentleman would not rest until we both were seated at the kitchen table, pulling out chairs for us with his frail white hands. Then he permitted himself to be seated. The wife still hovered in the background, without speaking.

It was a lovely restful feeling, sitting at the table, watching the man with the saintly face and my new friend and comrade,

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# CLIMBING

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listening to them speak Yiddish, knowing I did not have to take any responsibility. My mind was wandering when I heard his mellow voice take on a sharp edge and heard the word "Communist."

"Here we go," I thought, but no, after an even quiet flow of Yiddish from my friend, she asked me for the petition. I took it out, and handed him a pen. He asked another question or two, then signed slowly. By this time the wife had drawn closer and finally sat at the table's edge.

After his signature, performed in silence with the wife watching, my friend turned to her. Was she a registered voter? Silently she nodded, took the pen and signed. What was good enough for him was good enough for her. As we left, the gentle voiced man, his hat still on his head, gave us his blessing and held open the door while we made our way down the hall to the stairs.

"What a beautiful evening," said my partner as we reached the street. "Aren't people wonderful?"

"And what was it you said after he plainly didn't like the idea our candidate was a Communist?" I asked.

"Well, you probably don't know much about the Prophets," said my friend. "But I quoted the Prophet Isaiah."

"Oh, I know the Prophet Isaiah," I said. "I read up on him when I was writing about the Rosenbergs, as he was Julius Rosenberg's favorite prophet as a youth."

"Then," she said happily, "maybe you know the quote. I told him Elizabeth Gurley Flynn like Isaiah wanted to turn swords into ploughshares, and that we needed prophets today just as of old—and one on the City Council wouldn't hurt."