



From journalist to elected official, Mary-Ann Baldwin's passion drives her work

Growing up in a middle-class neighborhood of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, life was good for young Mary-Ann Baldwin. Sitting on her dad's lap as a toddler watching the Red Sox and "Wild Kingdom" on television, she became an avid fan of baseball, nature and animals, and those passions never dwindled. As she grew, her parents allowed her freedom to roam the outdoors and ride her bike, further cultivating her love of the natural world.

"We had to be home by dark, and it was just life like it used to be back then – it was very free," recalls Baldwin, now a two-term Raleigh mayor and a GoTriangle Board of Trustees member. "And that's what you did. You went out and played, and you played with your brother and sisters and friends."

After graduating from high school, Baldwin planned to attend secretarial school, but she cancelled those plans at the last minute, opting instead to attend Community College of Rhode Island.

"I'm going to go to community college because I don't know what I want to do," she told her worried father. "I don't know what I want to be."

She spent the intervening six months cutting slabs of beef at a local butcher shop and waiting tables at a diner, jobs she had worked since she was 17 years old, waiting for school to start.

"I actually saved enough money to buy my first car," she says. "Until then, I rode the bus, and I rode my bike everywhere. So, when I turned 18, I bought my first car. Then, I also put myself through community college, and it was the best thing I ever did in my life. It's where I found myself and what I was passionate about."

After taking her first journalism class and gaining confidence from her teacher's praise after he read aloud her work, she found direction.

"It really was one of those life-changing moments, and I realized that I really, absolutely, had a passion for journalism," she says.

Baldwin went on to graduate from the University of Rhode Island with a bachelor's degree in journalism, partly paying for her education through a federal Work-Study job on campus. She began work as a journalist, moving from small newspapers in Rhode Island to larger ones in New Rochelle, New York, where she covered crime, including in the Bronx, which she says was a "tough place."

"I saw things at age 25 that no 25-year-old should ever see," Baldwin says. "But at the same time, [the job] really shaped me and taught me. It taught me how to write on deadline. It taught me to appreciate the best in people while seeing the worst in people. But it was also special with my colleagues to share this love of journalism and reporting. And I felt like one of the reasons why I went into journalism is that I felt like I could help change the world. And that's why you do it."

She got promoted to assistant night editor at a New York newspaper, but after getting married, she realized that she needed a job with more normal hours so she could be at home. So, she left journalism and went into public relations and marketing, moving to Raleigh in 1988, where she and her first husband could afford to buy a house and where she thought the quality of life was better for raising their daughter.

Soon, she was sitting on various civic boards, working to improve the community. But it wasn't until the Raleigh sanitation workers went on strike and the city rejected a multimillion-dollar art gift that running for public office entered her mind. One evening at an art event, she recalls she was passionately voicing her opinion on those issues when someone suggested she run for the Raleigh City Council.

"I started laughing and said, 'No way, ever!' "she recalls.

But after an influential person later called her, suggesting she talk with three other people, she began to entertain the thought. She spoke to 47 other community members in business, nonprofits and education, asking if they would support her, and then decided to run.

After taking office in 2007, she served on the City Council until 2017, then took a two-year break from elected office before successfully running for mayor in 2019. Like being a journalist, being an elected official allows her to change the world for the better, she says.

She counts among her achievements attracting Citrix's former headquarters to Raleigh, which she says jumpstarted the Warehouse District redevelopment and led to multimillion-dollar investments there. She also led efforts to initiate a one-cent property tax dedicated to affordable housing that now brings in about \$7 million a year. She's worked to change zoning laws and supported a unified development code to give people more housing choices and allow for more density, especially along transit corridors, which created a vision for how the city would grow, she says.

She also has provided leadership for developing Oak City Cares, a multiservice center that provides services and connects those experiencing homelessness to nonprofit groups. And she worked to launch ACORNS, a year-old pilot program that incorporates social workers into policing to help people in need.

In the area of transit, she previously served nine years on the GoTriangle board before returning to serve in 2022 and also served on the Wake County Transit Advisory Board. She worked with others to form a transit advocacy group and help develop the Wake County Transit Plan. She advocated for the passage of the half-cent sales tax for transit, working on building support for it in the state legislature.

Connecting the region is one of her priorities, she says, and she sees Bus Rapid Transit, more frequent bus service and regional rail as the means to achieve it.

"Commuter rail, or an iteration of commuter rail, is my No. 1 priority. But I'm going to call it this – I'm going to call it regional rail, she says. "Let's do what's best not only for commuters but also our quality of life, and that regional rail is key to that. But I also believe that we have to support it with Bus Rapid Transit because that's going to put riders on regional rail. We've got to make it as easy as possible for people to get where they're going, and then the other thing that I've really focused over the years is more frequent bus service.

The path toward successfully connecting the region requires regional collaboration and improved relations with key decision makers in Washington, D.C., and ultimately, finding funding, she says. She says it's "awesome" that the Federal Transit Authority recently awarded \$77.8 million to the City of Raleigh for its second BRT line from the southern part of downtown to Garner.

"I feel very strongly that a lot of this comes down to communication and relationship building," she says. "Coming back on the board, I really feel that Raleigh needs to show leadership, and we also need to really work closely with the rest of the members of our region to make all this a reality."

Raleigh Mayor Mary-Ann Baldwin feeds a kangaroo during a recent overseas trip, when she visited Australia and New Zealand