Dear Elizabeth...One Woman's Essential Role In Helping Save Seattle's Pike Place Market

By Dominic Levenseller-Watland

Pike Place Market (often referred to as simply "the Market") is a place that has touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people since its establishment in 1907. One of the Market's most pivotal moments, its threatened destruction and potential engulfment by one of Seattle's urban renewal projects, required the efforts of thousands of petitioners, volunteers, and vendors to fight to preserve the Market's lifeblood and history. Amongst those who began raising concerns about the preservation of the Market, an organization known simply as the Friends of the Market emerged to coalesce the people's efforts in protecting the Market from the looming wrecking ball.

In 1963, the Central Association of Seattle – a group formed from downtown businessmen – unveiled a plan to "renew" the downtown areas of Seattle, which included the proposed demolition of entire neighborhoods to make way for new high-rise apartments, parking garages, and skyscrapers. One of the many areas targeted was the historic Pike Place Market as the Market was unfortunately worse for wear after a steady decline in economic and structural stability following the impacts of WWII internments and post-war suburbanization. However, the Central Association's push for urban redevelopment sought to upend the hundreds of residents and vendors of the Market, bulldoze the history embedded in the soul of the arcades, and utilize the downtown space to fill their own pockets in the process.

As many who read this may know, the Friends of the Market (the Friends) was formed in 1964 out of a deep concern to protect the cultural essence and historical value of one of Seattle's oldest institutions. Victor Steinbrueck is often deservedly presented as the figurehead of the Friends' success. He was a brilliant architect, University of Washington professor, a founding contributor to the organization, and an outspoken advocate for the Market. However, saving the Market was hardly a task that could

be accomplished by one singular person. Among the many people who came together to fight for the Market, there was an indispensable individual who has often fallen behind a veil of obscurity–a woman named Elizabeth Tanner.

Elizabeth Tanner was never one to seek the spotlight, but she cared deeply for people and the world around her. Born in Nebraska in 1921 and raised there, Tanner later remarked in videotape recordings how she had an aunt living in Seattle who introduced her to the Market and "it was a love affair right at the beginning and that was it." There are likely many things that drew Tanner to the Market, but the thing she notes late in her life is how she loved "the confusion and the noise of the Market; looking at all the people who are smiling and laughing just seeing them throw the fish." She was always drawn to people and could see the deep ties of community and life within the Market. So, in 1964 when she heard about Victor Steinbrueck's call for an Allied Arts Breakfast to address the threat to the Market, it was no surprise she showed up eager to contribute in whatever way she could to save what she loved.

Image Courtesy of the Pike Place Market Foundation. Depicts Elizabeth Tanner in the center with gloves on as she protested the demolition of the Market.

It is also possible her eagerness came from a place of grief. Elizabeth's son had recently died while he was hiking in the Cascade Mountains, and she noted in a family album that "to have stayed home and nursed my sorrow would only have

accomplished a loss of sanity" (Sorensen). During a time of great loss for Elizabeth, she turned to helping others and protecting her community in its time of need.

Elizabeth eagerly volunteered to defend the place she loved and quickly became the executive secretary for the newly formed Friends of the Market, as the organization's founding documents all list her as "being with the Friends from the beginning." She may have started by just taking the notes for the meetings, but she eventually grew into the administrative foundation of the entire organization. Soon she was corresponding with senators and politicians via letters, gathering signatures for the Friends' petition drives, organizing volunteers, setting up fundraisers, advising on public statements, and so much more—all from the tiny office the Friends of the Market operated in the Economy Market. The Friends relied entirely on its volunteers to be able to accomplish any sort of progress, especially in its earlier years; few devoted more time and energy than Elizabeth. As she pointed out herself, "we operated on a shoestring, but it didn't matter because we won."

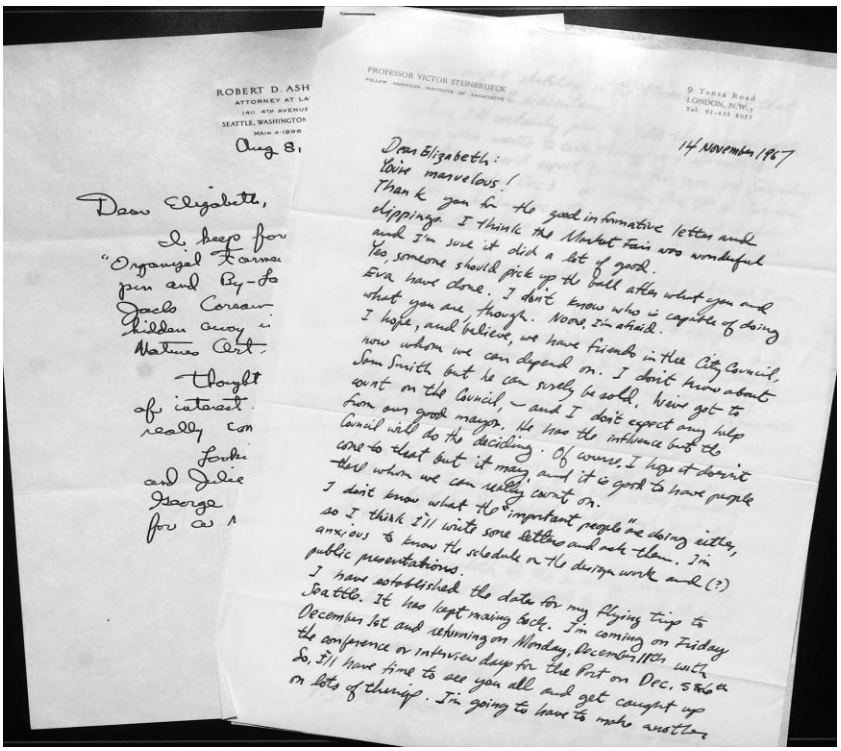


Image Courtesy of the UW Special Collections. Depicts letters to Elizabeth from Robert Ashley and Victor Steinbrueck on the left and right respectively.

The first few years after the founding of the Friends were spent in an effort to open the eyes of the general public to the beauty and thriving world of the Market, showing why it should be thoughtfully

preserved as opposed to demolition. Between the raised public awareness for the value of the Market and negotiations with the Pike Plaza Project urban planners, the Friends and Allied Arts were able to gain some concessions from the Central Association. "Proposal 21" was revealed in the winter of 1968 as their revised "renovation" of the Market district that kept some pieces of the original Market complex but added many modern inclusions and looming high-rises that would fundamentally alter the fabric and character of the Market.

Some of the Friends, such as one of the founding members Robert Ashley, found this a reasonable compromise. However, others such as Victor and Elizabeth, knew this would still ultimately lead to the Market's undoing. By the fall of 1968, Proposal 21 (also known as Scheme 23) finally reached the stages of review by the City of Seattle and contained more concessions for the Friends that included the preservation of a marginal number of buildings within the Market. Nonetheless, the Friends would not accept saving only half of the Market and a month after the review of Scheme 23, the Friends launched their "Let's Keep the Market" campaign to acquire 50,000 signatures in support of the petition to protect Pike Place. Signatures from concerned citizens, vendors, and business owners were gathered by the Friends volunteers – countless acquired by Elizabeth herself – that would eventually be completed with over 53,000 signatures to be presented to the Seattle City Council by March of 1969. However, due to legalities with the petition process, these signatures technically carried no legal weight in the eyes of the City. A second petition drive rapidly conducted in June 1971 acquired enough signatures to get the "Let's Keep the Market" public initiative on the November ballot. This initiative was passed by the citizens of Seattle with a margin of 76,000 Yes's to 53,000 No's.

Image Courtesy of the Friends of the Market. Depicts a voting pamphlet urging Seattle voters to vote Yes to "Keep the Market."

It was at that first Allied Arts breakfast meeting to discuss saving the Market where the foundations of Elizabeth and Victor's friendship began, and from that moment forward blossomed steadfast teamwork and a loving fellowship that would span the globe. During an interview in 1998, Elizabeth noted that Victor's spirit was embodied by "his honesty, his care, his belief, and well his spirit, plain as that...and we were really good friends." This friendship can also be traced back through the multitudes of letters written back and forth between the two on scribbled napkins, postcards with every inch covered in scrawl, pages and pages of heartfelt letters, and even some hideous April Fools stationary. These were especially prominent during 1968, where other professional work kept Victor away in London for a year, despite his yearning to fight for Pike Place Market, as well as other historic areas in Seattle threatened by urban renewal and modern development.

Due to his time away, there was little Victor could do directly for the Market preservation efforts. There were few people he trusted more than Elizabeth to help him do all they could to protect the City's history. Victor's son– Peter Steinbrueck– grew up around the Friends of the Market and remembers Elizabeth fondly. He recalls when he was eleven years old, during the Steinbrueck family's time in London, his father and Elizabeth would send almost weekly letters and make frighteningly expensive international phone calls. She was Victor's "trusted, loyal, and number one point of contact in a time of crisis," which was evident in the many letters Elizabeth kept from Victor during his time away from Seattle. It was an especially dangerous time as well, as this was the year during which Scheme 23 was preparing to be reviewed for approval by the City of Seattle. These letters and documents were meticulously collected over the years by Elizabeth, who was an avid archivist of the Friends' activities with a desire to preserve their accounts for future generations. Thanks to Elizabeth's efforts to collect all she could, the UW Special Collections now has a robust accounting of the hard work required to protect the Market from the wrecking ball.

Victor wrote letters and postcards at 1:00 AM, every inch would be blotted in ink and filled with tasks for Elizabeth to accomplish and memos to edit. Not only would they include organizational work, but also philosophical wonderings, his confided fears for the Market, and heartfelt conversation. There are many moments of gratitude shown by Victor within their letters, but one in particular shines brighter than the rest– "I know how very, very difficult it must be for you, Elizabeth...when there finally is a Market there for final sure, I'm going to carve a sculpture with my own hands to put in the center of the Market for you." Elizabeth provided vital information about city plans, coordinating support, contacting politicians, organizing events, and ensuring the Market was not lost during Victor's absence.

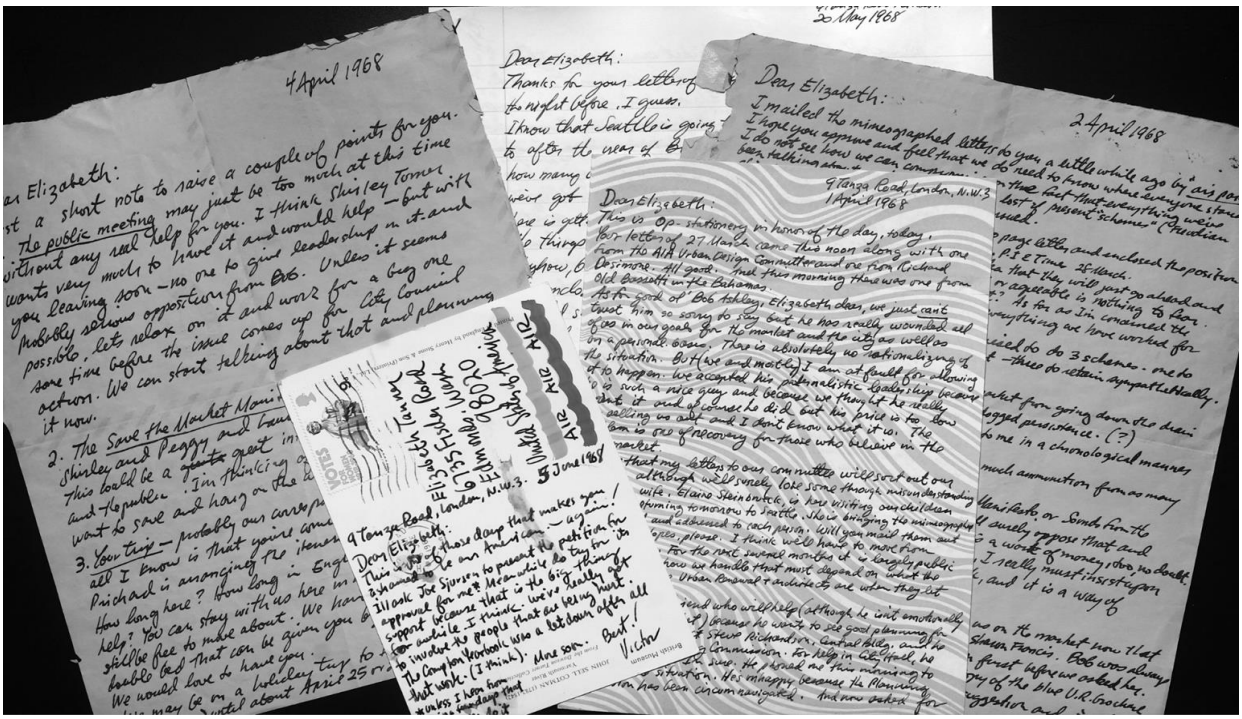
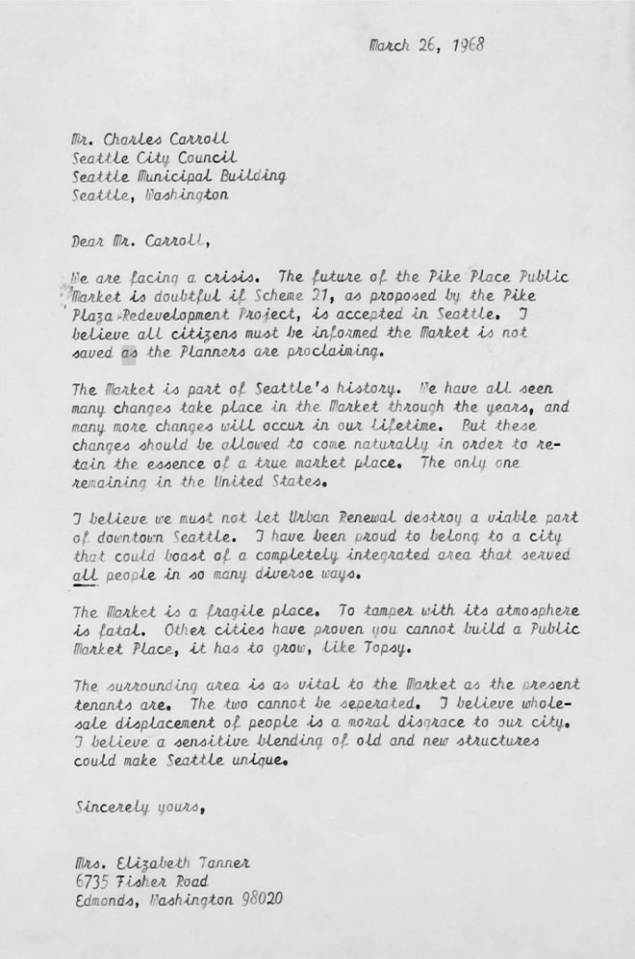


Image Courtesy of the UW Special Collections. Depicts various letters and a postcard from Victor Steinbrueck to Elizabeth while Victor was away in London that range in topic from travel excursions to philosophical musings on the Market.

While Elizabeth's efforts were especially crucial during Victor's year in London, the rest of her time with the Friends of the Market was just as invaluable. She became the oil and the cogs behind the apparatus that ultimately saved Pike Place Market. Elizabeth herself notes in letters how she never wanted attention or the spotlight when it came to speaking for the Market despite her intimate role in

its preservation. This is one of the reasons why many who may know of the Market's history and Victor may have never known the name Elizabeth Tanner. Peter Steinbrueck called it the “thankless job” of running an organization, and one that his father was not particularly good at either. Elizabeth was in the Friends office from 9-5, Mondays and Fridays, with the office staffed by various other volunteers from 10-2 Tuesday through Thursday, all of these workers unpaid. Many of the early volunteers for the Friends of the Market were housewives who saw the value the Market brought and dedicated their time towards its preservation. Without these women, and especially without Elizabeth Tanner, the Market may not have survived the serious threats it faced.



March 26, 1968

Mr. Charles Carroll
Seattle City Council
Seattle Municipal Building
Seattle, Washington

Dear Mr. Carroll,

We are facing a crisis. The future of the Pike Place Public Market is doubtful if Scheme 21, as proposed by the Pike Plaza Redevelopment Project, is accepted in Seattle. I believe all citizens must be informed the Market is not saved as the Planners are proclaiming.

The Market is part of Seattle's history. We have all seen many changes take place in the Market through the years, and many more changes will occur in our lifetime. But these changes should be allowed to come naturally in order to retain the essence of a true market place. The only one remaining in the United States.

I believe we must not let Urban Renewal destroy a viable part of downtown Seattle. I have been proud to belong to a city that could boast of a completely integrated area that served all people in so many diverse ways.

The Market is a fragile place. To tamper with its atmosphere is fatal. Other cities have proven you cannot build a Public Market Place, it has to grow, like Topsy.

The surrounding area is as vital to the Market as the present tenants are. The two cannot be seperated. I believe wholesale displacement of people is a moral disgrace to our city. I believe a sensitive blending of old and new structures could make Seattle unique.

Sincerely yours,

Mrs. Elizabeth Tanner
6735 Fisher Road
Edmonds, Washington 98020

Image Courtesy of the UW Special Collections. Depicts a heartfelt and steadfast letter written by Elizabeth to a Seattle City Council member urging them to protect the Market.

Even after the Market had been saved from the threat of the Pike Plaza Project through the “Let’s Keep the Market” Public Initiative in 1971 and the Pike Place (Preservation) Plan implemented, Elizabeth’s story did not end. Her husband, George Tanner, worked for Crowley Maritime and his work took them all over the world in the years after the Initiative, but their hearts were eventually pulled back to Seattle. It was around the time of George’s death in 1986 when Elizabeth began to help the Market by writing thank you notes and doing whatever else she could for the Market Foundation, an organization focused on raising funds for the community service programs of Pike Place Market. It was here she met the first Market Foundation Executive Director Marlys

Erickson, who remembers Elizabeth as kind, devoted, and caring– "not only for the people of Seattle, but also people who could use a leg up."

Speaking further to her kindness and generosity, Elizabeth also provided support for foster children over the years through the "Save the Children" organization. These children were from around the world in different continents and cities as Elizabeth tried to make an impact in their lives for the better. Marlys remarked how Elizabeth had at least five foster children and decided to visit them all before she became too old to travel. So, with her friend Allison who was an employee of the Market Foundation, Elizabeth traveled the world to personally meet all the children she helped to support. As Elizabeth spent the later years of her life volunteering with the Market Foundation, she continued to help in any way she could by writing thousands of thank you notes, organizing records, gathering volunteers, and raising funds despite her growing age. Her love for the Market glowed brightly until complications during surgery resulted in her death at the age of eighty-one in March of 2002.

Elizabeth Tanner left behind a silent legacy of her kindness and generosity that was not reflected in the articles and speeches, but rather in the hearts of the people of the Market. During a videotape interview conducted late in her life, Elizabeth recalled an incredibly meaningful interaction that occurred when she had returned to Seattle from her time abroad with her husband which perfectly encapsulated both her dedication to the Market and her humble nature.

> *When I[Elizabeth] came back to Seattle and was wandering through the Market, I ran into Rick, and I went into his shop and he said "Elizabeth!" and I said you remember me? And he paid me the best compliment I've ever received, "How could we forget you, we wouldn't be here without you."*

Peter Steinbrueck and Marlys Erickson share in this same sentiment, both proclaiming that Elizabeth was "invaluable for her contributions for so many years" and how "Victor gets all the well-deserved

credit, [but] I don't think it would've happened without Elizabeth," respectively. The nature of Elizabeth's role in saving Pike Place Market and her own desire to be out of the spotlight, left a hole in an incredibly important part of Seattle's history that deserves to be illuminated.

While Elizabeth's contributions and generosity were boundless, she was just one of the countless women who have been a vital part of the Market's long and beautiful history. From vendors, to volunteers, to heads of foundations, to shoppers – Pike Place Market's fate has been intertwined with the women of Seattle and their fierceness, generosity, community, and the hours they have given. So next time you walk through Pike Place Market to pick up fresh groceries, flowers, or a baked pastry, think of the thousands of women who have walked the arcades before you and how the Market we experience today would not be the same without the love and dedication of Elizabeth Tanner.

Special Thanks

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Sources

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