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Buck's mother recalls path that led him to crusade

Margaret Buckmelter arrives at her son's house, on a hill near Squaw Peak, just as the sun is going down.

In a large sunken, living room just inside the entrance, the local television news is showing on a big screen. However, no one is in the room, which has only one piece of furniture, a couch. There are few furnishings anywhere in the house, as if whoever lives there has just moved in. But, in fact, Buckmelter's son has lived in the house for a year.

Two T-shirts are nailed on a wall just inside the door. On one is printed, "Mecham for Ex-Governor." The other has a picture of Gov. Evan Mecham with his name and "Governor, 1987-1989" printed on it.

Buckmelter walks through the vacant family room, through a pair of sliding doors and onto a patio. Outside, there is a swimming pool, a small yard and, to the south, a spectacular view of Phoenix.

There is a path behind the pool leading to the top of another hill. From below, Buckmelter sees her son standing on a small wall on top of the hill. A photographer stands below him, snapping pictures.

"Buck, you're such a ham," she says as she climbs up to where her son stands.

"This gentleman is working for the *New York Times Magazine*, Mom," Ed Buck says to her.

"I'm impressed," she says, rolling her eyes.

"No," he answers. "You're just jealous."

Buckmelter smiles and says, "He's always had a smart mouth."


Then the mother and the son kiss.

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The Buckmelter family moved to Phoenix from Steubenville, Ohio, when Buck and his brother were boys. They were enrolled in a Catholic elementary school. Edward Bernard Peter Buckmelter, as Ed Buck was then known, was once sent home for arriving at grade school on St. Patrick's Day with his hair dyed green.

"He had his own mind," Margaret Buckmelter says. "Even then."

He went to North High School in Phoenix.



E.J. Montini
Republic
Columnist

"The dean of boys had a hot line to my phone at work," his mother says. "I'd answer the phone and say, 'All right, what is it this time?'"

It was Buckmelter who had to deal with her troublesome son. Buck said his father is a longtime alcoholic who has suffered some mental incapacity from the illness. By the time Buck was 16, he had told his parents that he was a homosexual and that he would leave home the first chance he got.

"It was tough on her then," Buck says about his mother. "But we've become real close friends."

He enrolled in Phoenix College and won a scholarship to study in Yugoslavia for a year. On a return visit after his year of study, he was offered a part as an extra in a television commercial. Shortly afterward, he decided that fashion modeling would be a way to get by in Europe. He worked in the business for five years, doing everything from movies to magazine covers. Then he got tired of it. He returned to Arizona in 1980, broke and without a job.

"One of the things I did when I got back was work for a friend of mine as a bicycle courier, picking up his mail," Buck says.

Buck's friend was offered the chance to buy the Arizona franchise of a national business providing driver's license information to insurance companies.

"I told him that if he bought the business for \$25,000 and let me work with it, I would buy it from him in a year for \$75,000," Buck says. "At the time, I had no idea about money, about business, about anything."

The firm, called Rapid Information Services, was located in a one-bedroom apartment near 17th Avenue and Roosevelt Street. Buck became obsessed with it. He had his name legally changed from Buckmelter to Buck "in part to make it easier for business contacts to remember." He taught himself about computers, about salesmanship, about marketing. Eventually, Buck moved into the company office, sleeping on a mattress in the storeroom.

Within a year and a half, he bought out his friend for \$250,000. Within five years, he sold the business for what he says was "a million-dollar profit."

It was 1986. Ed Buck — one-time vagabond student, fashion model and businessman — was suddenly rich, suddenly "retired" at age 32, suddenly looking for something to do.

"It was a tough time," he remembers. "I lost money on a restaurant. I lost money on a pay telephone business."

Then, Evan Mecham got elected governor.

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"There's an interesting parallel between the success of my business and the success of the recall," Buck says.

"When I began the recall, I was totally ignorant of politics. When I began in business, I was totally ignorant of business. In both instances, all the experts said it couldn't be done."

Buck started alone, standing at the state Capitol with a few crudely made bumper stickers. He passed out his telephone number to anyone who wanted to help with the recall and spent his evenings at home, alternating between four phone lines.

As the effort began to catch on, pro-Mecham forces began taking Buck more seriously. They found out about Buck's 1983 arrest for "public sexual indecency." It happened in a Phoenix adult bookstore. As Buck tells it, a police officer saw him "grab the crotch" of a friend. The charge was dismissed after Buck pleaded guilty to disturbing the peace and paid a fine.

Ron Bellus, then Mecham's press secretary, spent one day in January telephoning reporters to ask them if they had heard about a Department of Public Safety investigation into Buck's attempt to falsify a prescription.

It seems that Buck photocopied an old prescription for the painkiller Percodan — his dentist was out of town at the time — and tried to have it filled. As a result, a judge ordered Buck to be tested for drugs once a week for one year, after which the charges may be dismissed.

Buck's family also became targets.

One Mecham supporter telephoned Buck's father at home and said, "I can understand why you made your boy change his name, him being a fagot and all."

Ironically, the attacks against Buck attracted some of the recall movement's most energetic volunteers. They also illustrate one curious similarity between Ed Buck and Evan Mecham — as if such a thing were possible.

Each man, it seems, reacts to personal attacks by becoming even more committed to his cause.

"I have a vague memory of personal life and a social life and a sex life," Buck says. "But now it seems that everything is tied to the recall. All the rest have dried up."

Now that the recall movement has gathered more than 300,000 signatures and an election seems assured, people ask Buck about his own possible political aspirations.

"I don't believe that I would be happy holding elective office," he says.

"I'll be real honest with you. I think running for office would be fun. It's just that I don't think I would enjoy the bureaucracy once I got there."

"Besides, I think I'd be more effective as a private citizen. The recall movement has shown how people can get together and change things. I know how to do that now. It may come in handy later."

Margaret Buckmelter has been sitting quietly, listening to her son speak. I ask her what she thinks of all this.

"That's easy," she says. "I'm proud of him."

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