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The Stories We've Never Been Told

Christina Nifong Sep 1, 2026  3 min to read



Christina Nifong

Heath Hardage Lee's highlight reel includes events in elegant ballgowns, appearances on the "Today" show, and opportunities to curate exhibits at presidential museums. She has also conversed with political royalty, including President Richard Nixon's daughters, Tricia Nixon Cox and Julie Nixon Eisenhower; his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger; and Senators John McCain and Bob Dole.

The rest of her life? Find Lee in her tastefully decorated home office in suburban Richmond, her 7-year-old French bulldog, Dolly Parton, sleeping at her feet.

Lee, 56, is an independent historian who has published three acclaimed nonfiction books: **"The Mysterious Mrs. Nixon: The Life and Times of Washington's Most Private First Lady"** (2024), **"The League of Wives: The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home"** (2019), and **"Winnie Davis: Daughter of the Lost Cause"** (2014). "The League of Wives," an account of a determined band of women who fought to bring home their missing-in-action and prisoner-of-war husbands from Vietnam, is in development for a TV series.

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Lee has begun work on a new narrative nonfiction book, though she's not at liberty to say more. What she will say is that her books are fueled by a desire to discover and share the unknown stories of women.

"Women are so often just minor characters in the big male story," she says. "And there are so many stories that have not even been told at all. We have barely scratched the surface."

Alongside her drive, Lee is gracious, funny, and unpretentious. "I know her as a woman of depth, value, and purpose," says Andrea Rander, a League of Wives leader from Maryland who flew to Paris in the '60s and met Nixon in the Oval Office to negotiate the release of her husband and other POWs. Lee interviewed Rander for her book, and the two have remained close.



Heath Hardage Lee and Andrea Rander at the 2024 dedication of The League of Wives statue in Coronado, California. It's the first statue dedicated to military wives in the United States, prompted by the attention the group received after the publication of Lee's book.

Lee grew up in Richmond and attended **St. Catherine's School**, a private, all-girls elementary through high school. She was a history major at **Davidson College**, where she first researched Confederate President Jefferson Davis' daughter, Winnie. She earned a master's in French language and literature at the **University of Virginia**. Lee considered a life of academia, but a yearning to write won out. She married, followed her husband (working in finance) to Charlotte, North Carolina, then Des Moines, Iowa, then Roanoke, Virginia. When husband Chris Lee retired in 2024, Heath announced she was moving home.

Across the years, she had two children and worked for a variety of history museums. The isolation of Iowa (where she had no family or friends and the winters were long) spurred her to turn her college thesis into her first book.



Heath Hardage Lee with Former First lady of Virginia Susan Allen after Lee moderated a talk at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture

For her second, Lee learned that papers of family friend Phyllis Galanti had been given to the **Virginia Museum of History & Culture**. The letters and diaries sparked Lee's interest in the then-little-known League of Wives. In tandem with the book, Lee developed a museum exhibit that launched at the **Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics** in Lawrence, Kansas and traveled across the country for five years. Part of the exhibit is now housed in the **Visitor Center**

at the **United States Naval Academy in Annapolis**. "Over 150,000 people saw that," Lee says. "I still get people writing me about the exhibit."

Researching *The League of Wives* piqued Lee's curiosity about Pat Nixon's influence on her husband. This led her to write the first commercial biography of Mrs. Nixon in 40 years.

Since its publication, Lee has headlined speaking engagements at **The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum** in Grand Rapids, Michigan; the **Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum** in Independence, Missouri; the **Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum** in Yorba Linda, California; and the **National First Ladies Library and Museum** in Canton, Ohio. "All my books, I've been lucky. There's been extended interest, like two or three years of talks," Lee says.



Heath Hardage Lee signing books at the Gerald Ford Presidential Library after a presentation about the friendship between Pat Nixon and Betty Ford



Heath Hardage Lee at the Hoover Institution, where League of Wives leader Andrea Rander's papers and artifacts will be archived

But for the women whose stories Lee tells, the impact can be profound. Rander, 88, has been gathering papers and artifacts connected to the League of Wives and her husband's return from Vietnam. A new Rander Collection has been created at the **Hoover Institution Library & Archives at Stanford University** and will be announced this fall. "I need people to understand what it took, how we did it, why we did it," Rander says.

Because of Lee, this history will not be forgotten.