

Geraldine A Ferraro: A woman of Consequence Who Did “Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night.”

by Aileen Riotto Sirey * (April 05, 2011)



Proud of her Italian ethnic background, she was a compassionate and decent woman, a great mother and wife. Both in her private and public life she never lost the courage to struggle against injustices, including her fatal illness

Geraldine Anne Ferraro was a doer. She saw needs, and she made things happen. The newspapers and TV programs of the last few weeks spoke of her outstanding achievements. They told of the dynamic Prosecutor in the Queens DA's office, the hard working Congresswoman from Queens, the bright protégé of Speaker Tip O'Neil, the formidable debater, the tough vice presidential candidate,



and the sharp, quick woman in the later stages of her career who bowled over the barriers to women's empowerment.

The speakers at Gerry's funeral were President [Bill Clinton](#) [2], Vice President [Walter Mondale](#) [3], former and current Secretaries of State [Madeline Albright](#) [4] and [Hillary Clinton](#) [5], Senator Barbara Mikulski, and Congresswoman Jane Harmon. Each eloquently told her public story. Other notables in attendance were Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#) [6], Matilda and Gov. Mario Cuomo, Senators Chuck Schumer, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Kirsten Gillibrand, Mayor [Bloomberg](#) [7], and NYC Councilman Dan Garodnick--my nephew.

Multiple Myeloma found a formidable opponent in Geraldine Ferraro. When she was diagnosed with the disease, she immediately went to war. She waged not only a strong defensive battle--winning back years from the original prognosis of her fatal illness--but she mounted a powerful offensive campaign as well, pulling together people and resources to raise awareness, do research, and provide education. She was instrumental in getting legislation passed to benefit current and future victims of the disease.

That was characteristic Gerry: Something is wrong here; let's fix it!

Gerry and I met in 1980. Many Italian American women back then felt the need for a representative organization and were actively seeking one in order to deal with distasteful stereotypes. But it was Geraldine Ferraro who actually triggered the start of the [National Organization of Italian American Women](#) [8]. The first time we met, I asked her if she knew of any groups for women of our background. She said there were none, and that the only Italian American organizations she knew of were the ones where "...the men made the speeches the women made the coffee. Why don't you start one?" Then she added, "I'll help."

Something is wrong here; let's fix it!

That was the beginning of an unlikely friendship between an inner-oriented psychotherapist and an outward-oriented lawyer and politician, a relationship that has enriched my life immeasurably over the past 31 years. Although I am somewhat interested in politics, politics was not the basis of our close friendship. Of course, I clearly respected her achievements, but I have met many very accomplished women of Italian ancestry. It was Gerry's humanity, decency and ability to care that commanded my affection beyond her career successes. I knew the wife, mother...and the compassionate human being.

We had a lot in common. We were [Depression Era](#) [9] babies, born a month apart. We became mothers for the first time in the very same year. Both our fathers were born in Italy; our mothers in the US. And coincidentally, each of our mothers died at the same age...within 3 days of each other. We had a lot to talk about all the time! We exchanged recipes and told stories about our shared Italian background, our childhood years, and the very tough economic times we had in the 1930's and 40's. We traveled to Italy several times, most memorably to [Caserta](#) [10] to see her family. We compared notes (and sometimes complaints) about our kids and our husbands...and on rare occasions we spoke of politics.

We bonded initially around a mutual desire to accomplish a sisterhood or support network for Italian American women. Gerry was proud of her ethnic background and took her lumps because of it. I still can't forgive or forget Sam Donaldson's comment when Gerry ran for Vice President: "Italian Americans should expect the press to pursue allegations linking them to the Mafia." The world is politically correct with everyone except Italian Americans!

When we were out together, Gerry was always willing to speak with strangers who approached her on the street, in a restaurant, or in a drug store. People would stop her wherever we were to talk



about whatever was on their minds. And that continued into the last few years as she took calls and wrote to many strangers who reached out to her seeking information or help with Multiple Myeloma. She took the time to share her experience and treatment options to help others. And on dozens of occasions she would say to me, “What do people do if they don’t have the health insurance or money to pay for the treatment I’m getting?”

Something’s wrong here; let’s fix it!

My dear friend, Geraldine Anne Ferraro, exemplified all of the positive characteristics that we hope for in our public servants. She was also an exceptional human being. I will miss her.

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