



Farewell to a Legend

Bettie Naylor, a longtime champion and fierce advocate for the rights of women, workers and the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender community, passed away peacefully in her sleep on April 19 at her home in Austin. She was 84.

Her desire to become involved in the world of politics began in San Antonio during the 1970s, when she helped create the Women's Political Caucus. Back then, noted feminist Sissy Farenthold was running for governor of Texas, and Bettie was invigorated by the idea that a female could be elected to govern her beloved Texas.

Born in 1927 in Wichita Falls, Bettie grew up with a great sense of self confidence and an easy way with people. Though she married Van Naylor, an Air Force pilot, and had three children with him, her 30-year marriage ended when she fell in love with a woman whom she had met through her political activities. After an amicable divorce, Bettie faced head-on the issues battling women, gays and lesbians, and decided someone should speak out, so it may as well be her.

Though small in stature, Bettie was a proverbial Tall Texan when it came to recognizing and becoming enraged about unfair wages for women, racism, sexism and homophobia.

Though Bettie loved San Antonio, she moved to Austin in the late 70's to get closer to the Capitol and the legislators who worked there. She was so determined to make an impact, she moved into the Westgate, a beautiful 25-story Austin condominium complex that overlooked the Capitol, so she could literally cross the street and be on Capitol grounds. She started work in Austin as a lobbyist for the First Amendment Coalition, where she advocated for GLBT rights.

Her daughter Sharron Naylor said, "Mom was such a force of nature, even the most outspoken right-wing conservative legislators liked and respected her. They may have vehemently disagreed with her political agenda, but they always made time for her on their calendars, and some of them even softened their anti women/anti gay stances because of her influence."

Helping to found the Women's Political Caucus in San Antonio gave Bettie a taste for creating coalitions, caucuses and other organizations where more impact could be made on the legislature. Perhaps her greatest political achievement was in co-founding The Human Rights Campaign in 1980, which today is the largest and most influential GLBT advocacy and political lobby in America, with more than one million members.



Regardless of her incredibly busy schedule and ever widening sphere of political influence, Bettie kept tabs on all Texas organizations that dedicated themselves to equality for women, workers and the GLBT community.

She had frequently discussed the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center with me, often saying, "They have created an important resource for people in need, and they have given a voice to women, people of color, poor people and the GLBT community where none existed before." Bettie delighted in hearing about the Esperanza's victorious lawsuit against the City of San Antonio after the city had defunded them. She said, with a laugh, "That's how you have to take on bullies who prey on those they perceive to be weaklings; you have to beat them at their own game. The Esperanza wasn't going to take defunding lying down, so they fought like Hell in the courts and they won!"

One of Bettie's best friends in Austin was the late Governor Ann Richards. In fact, in the dining room of Bettie's home was a huge photo of the two of them, taken inside the Capitol in front of a portrait of Sam Houston. Inscribed at the bottom, in Ann Richards's perfect penmanship, it read, "Bettie, what would Sam Houston think?!"

Bettie's memorial service took place on May 5 at the First United Methodist Church in Austin. Nearly 1,000 people were in attendance, where they watched a beautiful interview Bettie and her partner Libby Sykora had given to G/L Magazine. Heartfelt eulogies were given by her good friends and political allies, former State Representative A. R. "Babe" Schwartz (D-Galveston), State Representative Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston) and Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-Austin/San Antonio). Though the eulogies all contained similarities about Bettie being an indefatigable advocate, all three speakers mentioned how Bettie personally helped them better understand the importance of full civil rights for the GLBT citizens of Texas. While all three said they were always accepting of the GLBT community, Bettie helped them construct simple but impactful statements they could share with their constituents who vehemently objected to gay rights.

While Bettie Naylor led a life of exemplary public service, she was a devoted partner, a loving mother and grandmother, and a great friend. Bettie's daughter and my sister have been together more than 25 years, so I had the great fortune of seeing Bettie often, especially on holiday occasions when families traditionally meet. Her inside political scoops were the highlight of our family dinners, and her sense of humor was extraordinary. She lit up any room she entered, and she will be fondly remembered by everyone whose life she touched. ✨ - Karen Littleton