

# Ford

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"That's a God-given gift as far as I'm concerned. I don't take any credit for providing anything that wasn't provided to me."

After the former president died Dec. 26, 2006, at age 93, his widow said: "His life was filled with love of God, his family and his country." They had been married in 1948, the same year he was elected to Congress.

As she and their children led the nation in mourning him, Americans were reminded anew of her own contributions, as well as his. It was calculated then that the Betty Ford Center had treated 76,000 people.

"It's hard to imagine a more important figure in the substance abuse field than Mrs. Ford," Rick Rawson, associate director of the integrated substance abuse program at the University of California at Los Angeles, said at the time.

She and her husband had retired to Rancho Mirage after he lost a bruising presidential race to Jimmy Carter in 1976. She went to work on her memoirs, "The Times of My Life," which came out in 1979. But the social whirlwind that engulfed them in Washington was over, and Betty

Ford confessed that she missed it.

"We had gone into the campaign to win and it was a great disappointment losing, particularly by such a small margin," she said. "It meant changing my whole lifestyle after 30 years in Washington, and it was quite a traumatic experience."

By 1978, she was addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs. She would later describe herself during that period as "this nice, dopey pill-pusher sitting around and nodding."

"As I got sicker," she recalled, "I gradually stopped going to lunch. I wouldn't see friends. I was putting everyone out of my life." Her children recalled her living in a stupor, shuffling around in her bathrobe, refusing meals in favor of a drink.

Her family finally confronted her in April 1978 and insisted she seek treatment. She credited their "intervention" with saving her life.

"I was stunned at what they were trying to tell me about how I disappointed them and let them down," Ford told The Associated Press in 1994.

"I was terribly hurt — after I had spent all those years trying to be the best mother, wife I could be. ... Luckily, I was able to hear them saying that I needed help and they cared too much about me to let it go on, she said.

She entered Long Beach Naval Hospital and underwent a grim detoxification, which became the model for therapy at the Betty Ford Center. She saw her recovery as a second chance at life.

"When you come back from something that was as disagreeable and unsettling as my alcoholism, when you come back to health from that, everything is so much more valuable," she said in her book, "A Glad Awakening."

Her own experience, and that of a businessman friend whom she helped save from alcoholism, were the inspiration for the center, located on the grounds of the Eisenhower Medical Center. She helped raise \$3 million, lobbied in the state capital for its approval, and reluctantly agreed to let it be named for her.

"The center's name has been burden, as well as honor," she wrote. "Because even if nobody else holds me responsible, I hold myself responsible."

She liked to tell patients, "I'm just one more woman who has had this problem."

Her efforts won her a Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, from the first President Bush in 1991. In October 1999: Gerald and Betty Ford both were awarded Congressional Gold Medals.

She continued to be outspoken on public issues, pressing for

fellow Republicans to be moderate on social questions. She spoke out in favor of gays in the military in a 1993 Washington Post interview, saying they had been serving for many years.

During the Clinton presidency, Mrs. Ford praised first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, saying she had been with her at a meeting on health care and found her "courteous, charming, able, attractive. ... She asks good questions. She picked out one of the most demanding roles she possibly could."

In 2005, she was presented with the Gerald R. Ford Medal of Distinguished Public Service from her husband's foundation, telling the gathering that it was "very, very special." She added in her typical candor: "It's kind of all in the family, and I feel a little guilty about it."

Mrs. Ford's first public appearance after her husband's death was in August 2007, when she attended a ceremony near Rancho Mirage as a postage stamp honoring the late president was issued. She did not speak. She had not traveled to Texas for the funeral of Lady Bird Johnson the previous month.

Elizabeth Bloomer was born in Chicago on April 8, 1918, and raised in Grand Rapids, Mich. She was talented in dancing and ultimately studied with the great dancer and choreographer Martha Graham. She also worked

as a model to make extra money during the Depression.

With her gray-green eyes, chestnut hair and stately bearing, she was often described as regal.

An early marriage to a furniture company representative, William Warren, ended in divorce before she met Gerald Ford, a lawyer just out of the Navy. When he proposed in 1948, she said later, she had no idea he planned a political career.

"I really thought I was marrying a lawyer, and we'd be living in Grand Rapids," she recalled. Then he announced his plan to run for Congress and even made a campaign appearance during their honeymoon.

Political life was hard for her. While her husband campaigned or worked late on Capitol Hill, she raised their four children: Michael Gerald, born in 1950; John Gardner, born in 1952; Steven Meigs, born in 1956; and Susan Elizabeth, born in 1957.

She said the pressure led her to consult a psychiatrist who told her "I shouldn't give up everything for my husband and my children, but had to think about what mattered to me."

The children were in their late teens and early 20s by the time the Fords moved into the White House and only Susan lived there. But they were a close family, gathering at Vail, Colo., for Christmas skiing vacations.

"When I came to Washington, I saw my job as a supporting wife

and mother," Mrs. Ford said. "But I came to feel an emptiness in spite of the fact I was happy. The old term housewife just didn't seem right. That's when I looked for support in my thinking that there must be something more than that. And indeed there is."

She became an outspoken advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment, favored legal abortion and supported drafting women for the armed services. When asked on "60 Minutes" what she would do if her daughter, Susan, had an affair, she responded, "Well, I wouldn't be surprised. I'd think she was a perfectly normal human being. ... If she wanted to continue, I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject."

Drawing on her dance background, she also helped foster interest in the arts during her time as first lady. She reconnected with her old teacher Graham, who remembered her as "very dedicated," and Graham received the Medal of Freedom in a White House ceremony during the Ford years.

When she underwent a radical mastectomy for removal of a cancerous breast, she kept no secrets, bringing the disease into the open.

Thousands of women rushed to get breast examinations because of Ford's example.



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