



Jean Carpenter Carnahan

December 20, 1933 - January 30, 2024

Jean Carpenter Carnahan (1933-2024)

Missouri's First Woman U.S. Senator, Former First Lady, Author (St. Louis, Missouri) – Jean Carnahan, former U.S. Senator, Missouri First Lady, and matriarch of a family of public servants, died on Tuesday evening, January 30, 2024, at age 90 after a brief illness.

The widow of Governor Mel Carnahan, Jean was appointed to the U.S. Senate seat Mel won posthumously in 2000, becoming the first woman to represent Missouri in the Senate.

“Mom passed peacefully after a long and rich life. She was a fearless trailblazer. She was brilliant, creative, compassionate and dedicated to her family and her fellow Missourians,” her family said in a statement.

During two years in the Senate, Carnahan, a Democrat, was a tireless advocate for education, children, seniors and working families -- causes she also championed during eight years as Missouri's First Lady.

As only the fifth woman to ever serve on the Senate Armed Services Committee, she pushed to strengthen national security and improve conditions for service men and women. She secured an extension of health care benefits for returning reservists and National Guard personnel. And she was part of the first Congressional delegation to Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Following the Enron scandal, as a member of the Commerce Committee, she introduced and won passage of a law requiring corporations to make swift electronic reporting of insider trading.

As First Lady, Carnahan promoted on-site day care centers for working families, supported shelters for victims of domestic abuse, volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and encouraged arts education.

She also raised funds for critically needed repairs for Missouri's historic Governor's Mansion and frequently opened the mansion doors to the public. The author of seven books, she published two about the mansion: "If Walls Could Talk: The Story of Missouri's First Families," an encyclopedic work researched over five years, and "Christmas at the Mansion."

Her other books include "Don't Let the Fire Go Out!," an autobiography focusing on her years as First Lady and U.S. Senator, and "A Little Help from My Friends," a light-hearted look at everyday life from a senior's perspective.

Carnahan's family has a long history of public service in Missouri. In addition to her husband's tenure as Governor, Lieutenant Governor, State Treasurer and state legislator, daughter Robin served as Missouri Secretary of State and son Russ served in the U.S. Congress and the Missouri House.

On October 16, 2000, Mel, their son Roger, and long-time aide Chris Sifford were killed in a plane crash while heading to a campaign event in southeast Missouri. Mel was elected to the Senate posthumously three weeks later. Acting Governor Roger Wilson appointed Jean Carnahan to fill the seat left vacant by her husband's death. She served from January 3, 2001 until November 25, 2002.

In remarks to her newly elected Senate colleagues, Carnahan observed, “I know I did not come to the U.S. Senate in the same way you did. I did not have a long-term, personal commitment to a campaign. My name has never been on a ballot. On election night, there was no victory celebration. You are here because of your win. I am here because of my loss. But we are all here to do the work of this great nation.”

Jean Carpenter Carnahan was born Dec. 20, 1933, in Washington, D.C., to Reginald and Alvina Carpenter, and grew up in the southeast D.C. working-class neighborhood of Anacostia. Her father was a plumber and her mother a hairdresser.

She met her future husband Mel, son of Missouri Congressman A.S.J. Carnahan, while they were teen-agers attending a Sunday night youth group at a neighborhood Baptist church in Washington. The two became better acquainted at Anacostia High School where they were seated next to each other in class.

They were married on June 12th, 1954. A year later, in an era when few

women attended college, Carnahan graduated from George Washington University with a bachelors degree in Business and Public Administration. The couple raised four children on a farm outside the small Ozarks community of Rolla, Missouri.

Carnahan is survived by her children Russ (Debra), Robin (Juan Carlos) and Tom (Lisa), all of St. Louis, and grandchildren Austin Carnahan, Andrew Carnahan, Harper Carnahan, Adair Carnahan and Cabanne Carnahan. In addition to her husband Mel and eldest son Roger (nicknamed "Randy"), Carnahan was preceded in death by her parents and her granddaughter, Sydney Carnahan. She died at the BJC Hospice-Eveyn's House in suburban St. Louis, where she and her family were very grateful for the attentive care and kindness shown by all the staff.

A private family service will be held at Carson Hill Cemetery near Ellsinore, where Carnahan will be laid to rest next to her husband and son.

A public celebration of Carnahan's life is being planned in St. Louis, for February 10, 2024 at The Sheldon.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions are requested to the Carnahan Policy Institute, which sponsors the Mel Carnahan Public Service Award and

Scholarship, helping students and recognizing individuals who have improved the lives of Missourians through a commitment to education, law or public service. Donations can be made online at <https://carnahanaward.org/donate/>

For those unable to attend, here is the link for Live Stream

<https://vimeo.com/event/4070972>

Private graveside services were held at Carson Hill Cemetery on Saturday April 13, 2024 under the direction of Archway Memorial Chapel.

Cemetery Details

Carson Hill Cemetery

2898+R9
Mill Spring, MO 63952

Previous Events

Celebration of Life Gathering

FEB **10**. 10:00 AM (CT)

The Sheldon
3648 Washington Avenue
St Louis, MO 63108

Tribute Wall

LB

“ Jean and I walked to Anacostia High School together...Please accept my condolences. Leona Krebeck Burnham

Leona Krebeck Burnham - June 16, 2024 at 03:02 PM

PH

“ Years ago I was doing a Flat Stanley project for my then 9 year old Florida nephew. I had a wonderful afternoon taking Stanley to all the sights in Jefferson City, including the capitol. My friend who worked for then Speaker Steve Gaw suggested I contact Mrs. Carnahan to see if she would give Stanley a tour of the Governor's Mansion. Figuring I didn't have anything to lose, I called Mrs. Carnahan's secretary and explained my project. She was very familiar with Flat Stanley and told me she would ask the First Lady and then call me back. The next morning she called to tell me I could have ten minutes that afternoon. Stanley and I went to the Mansion for what I thought would be a quick couple of pictures. Instead Mrs. Carnahan spent the first several minutes talking with me about the Flat Stanley project, asking where Stanley had visited and about my Florida nephew. The couple of photos turned into a half dozen and she took us to nearly every room on the first floor of the Mansion, posing him for the full effect of the room. She acted like she had all the time in the world for this project. As we were saying our goodbyes, the First Lady turned to me and asked, "Don't you want a picture with me, too?" I was so grateful for all the time she had given me that I had not even thought about a picture of the two of us. This photo is framed and has been sitting in my bookcase ever since. I so admired this wonderful woman. Rest in peace, Mrs. Carnahan.

Pat Hubbs - February 15, 2024 at 11:47 PM

JD

“ *Judith Conoyer Ph. D. sent a virtual gift in memory of Jean Carpenter Carnahan*



Judith Conoyer Ph. D. - February 10, 2024 at 08:22 PM

CA

“ *Our deepest condolences to Robin, Russ, Tom the entire Carnahan family. I grew up next door to the Carnahan's. Jean and the entire family were always kind neighbor's. I have fond memories of sitting in their kitchen, when I was young. We had neighborhood gatherings that included making applebutter. Jean was always so kind and never failed to offer a nice home-cooked snack and cool drink. The world was better with Jean in it. We will remember her fondly and our thoughts are with the family.*

*Chanda (Ayars) & Emily Saultz
Gordon Ayars*

Chanda Saultz & Gordon Ayars - February 08, 2024 at 09:27 PM

KS

“ *Ken McGhee & Archway Staff lit a candle in memory of Jean Carpenter Carnahan*



Ken McGhee & Archway Staff - February 08, 2024 at 05:04 PM

OA

“ Office of the President & Advancement purchased the Medium Dish Garden for the family of Jean Carpenter Carnahan.



Office of the President & Advancement - February 08, 2024 at 04:09 PM

OA

“ Office of the President & Advancement planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Jean Carpenter Carnahan.

Office of the President & Advancement - February 08, 2024 at 04:09 PM

RS

“Jaime and I are saddened by the news of the passing of former U.S. Senator and Missouri First Lady Jean Carnahan. All of her family and friends are in our prayers during this difficult time.”

U.S. Senator Eric Schmitt, R-Missouri

“As matriarch of the greatest political dynasty in modern Missouri history, Jean Carnahan was dedicated to her family. As a U.S. senator and first lady, her dedication to the people of Missouri was unsurpassed. Her life had an impact on all who knew her, and her legacy of service will not be forgotten.”

Missouri House Democratic Leader Crystal Quade of Springfield

“Missouri has lost a trailblazer and icon with the passing of Jean Carnahan. The first woman to represent the Show-Me State in the U.S. Senate, Sen. Carnahan gave our state hope and vision in one of its darkest hours. My thoughts and prayers are with the Carnahan family.”

Missouri Senate Democratic Leader J.J. Rizzo of Kansas City

“I told Senator Jean Carnahan recently that she was like a flower that bloomed wherever she was planted. As a mom, community leader, first lady, Senator, writer, and food blogger, she was smart, creative, and clever. While coping with the personal tragedy of losing her husband, Mel, and her oldest son, Randy, and beloved staffer, Chris Sifford, she also dealt with the loss of her family home in a house fire, 9/11 and its aftermath, served admirably on the committee investigating Enron, and worked out of a hideaway in the

Capitol when our office building was hit by an anthrax attack. As the first woman to serve as a U.S. Senator from Missouri, she felt enormous pressure to do the job well, and she delivered on every front.”

Roy Temple, long-time aide and adviser to Jean and Mel Carnahan

“Jean Carnahan was a gracious and tenacious Missourian who always sought to serve our state as she did as First Lady and the state’s first female U.S. Senator. Melanie and I extend our condolences to the Carnahan family.”

Former Governor Matt Blunt, R-Missouri

“Jean Carnahan served a short time in the Senate, but she left an impressive legacy. She was known for her civility, willingness to work on a bipartisan basis and focus on Missouri. Jean was a very strong champion for children, working on the issues of day care and pediatric health care. The children of both Missouri and America could know Jean Carnahan was in their corner.”

Former Senator Barbara Mikulski, D-Maryland

“We won’t let the fire go out. Thank you to Jean Carnahan for a lifetime of love and service to the people of Missouri and our country.”

Kansas City, Missouri, Mayor Quinton Lucas



“ FULL TRIBUTE FROM PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN

Jean Carnahan was a devoted partner, public servant, and the first woman to represent Missouri in the U.S. Senate, and someone I'm proud to have called a dear friend. In the face of unspeakable loss, she found the courage to step up into work she'd never imagined, putting the people and values she believed in above her personal comfort in order to serve our nation.

I remember when she arrived in Washington, just weeks after losing her husband, Mel, and their son, Randy, in a plane crash. I didn't know her then, but I knew her loss. When I met her, moments after she'd been sworn in to Mel's seat in the Senate, I told her what other senators had told me when I'd first arrived, having just lost my own wife and daughter – “lose yourself in the work.” But Jean found herself in the work, and over the years, I saw her turn her pain into tremendous purpose.

Jean always knew the value of hard work. She met the love of her life, Mel, in high school, where they sat together in class. She worked her way through college, the first in her family to graduate, at a time when many women never considered attending. Married at 21, she became Mel's indispensable political partner, in the field, in the governor's mansion, and over the decades helping to run his nearly two dozen state and local campaigns. Whether working to pass school bonds in their hometown of Rolla, or fighting for daycare for working families as Missouri's First Lady, she was sharp, kind, and committed to consensus. She revered history and took the honor of the job seriously, personally raising funds to restore the governor's mansion as the people's house.

In the U.S. Senate, Jean worked for gun safety and reproductive freedom. She stood up for workers, sponsoring legislation to support folks who'd lost their jobs in the wake of 9/11. And as one of only a handful of women to have then served on the Armed Services Committee, she was part of the first Congressional

delegation to travel to Afghanistan that year, and helped to guide our country through its own immense grief at that time.

When Mel was killed, Jean embraced a new motto – “don’t let the fire go out.” She dedicated her life to stoking the flames. And thanks to her quiet courage and lifetime of service, they will keep burning bright.

I’m grateful for Jean’s support over the years, and for the support of her brilliant, strong children, Russ, Tom, and especially Robin, whom I’m so proud to have serving in my Administration as our Administrator of General Services.

Our love is with them today; with her grandchildren; and with the people of Missouri whom she so honorably served in so many ways for so long.

MORE TRIBUTES TO JEAN CARNAHAN

“Jean was a kind, brilliant person who dedicated her life to serving others. And when tragedy struck her family she again stepped up to serve Missouri.”

Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York.

“Jean Carnahan was a friend, a wonderful public servant, a devoted wife and mom who cared deeply about her family, her fellow Missourians and our beautiful state and country. She and Governor Mel Carnahan made a terrific team and they made history in Missouri. She will be missed.”

Former U.S. House Majority Leader Richard A. "Dick" Gephardt, D-St. Louis

Randy Singer - February 01, 2024 at 11:51 AM