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Ethel Kennedy, social activist, dies at 96

Widow of slain RFK received Presidential Medal of Freedom

MICHAEL CASEY AND STEVE LEBLANC
Associated Press

BOSTON, Mass. — Ethel Kennedy, the widow of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy who raised their 11 children after he was assassinated and remained dedicated to social causes and the family's legacy for decades thereafter, died on Thursday, her family said. She was 96.

Kennedy had been hospitalized after suffering a stroke in her sleep on Oct. 3, her family said.

"It is with our hearts full of love that we announce the passing of our amazing grandmother," Joe Kennedy III posted on X. "She died this morning from complications related to a stroke suffered last week."

"Along with a lifetime's work in social justice and human rights, our mother leaves behind nine children, 34 grandchildren and 24 great-great grandchildren along with numerous nieces and nephews, all of whom love her dearly," the family statement said.

The Kennedy matriarch, whose children were Kathleen, Joseph II, Robert Jr., David, Courtney, Michael, Kerry, Christopher, Max, Douglas and Rory, was one of the last remaining members of a generation that included President John F. Kennedy. Her family said she had recently enjoyed seeing many of her relatives, before falling ill.

A millionaire's daughter who married the future senator and attorney general in 1950, Ethel Kennedy had endured more death by the age of 40, for the whole world to see, than most would in a lifetime.

She was by Robert F. Kennedy's side when he was fatally shot in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, just after winning the Democratic presidential primary in California. Her brother-in-law, President John F. Kennedy, had been assassinated in Dallas less than five years earlier.

Her parents were killed in a plane crash in 1955, and her brother died in a 1966 crash. Her son David Kennedy later died of a drug overdose, son Michael Kennedy in a skiing accident and nephew John F. Kennedy Jr. in a plane crash. Another nephew, Michael Skakel, was found guilty of murder in 2002, although a judge in 2013 ordered a new trial and the Connecticut Supreme Court vacated his conviction in 2018.

In 2019, she was grieving again after granddaughter Saoirse Kennedy Hill died of an apparent drug overdose.

"One wonders how much this family must be expected to absorb," family friend Philip Johnson, founder of the Robert F. Kennedy Foundation, said after Michael Kennedy's death.

Ethel Kennedy sustained herself through her faith and devotion to family.

"She was a devout Catholic and a daily communicant, and we are comforted in knowing she is reunited with the love of her life, our father, Robert. F. Kennedy; her children David and Michael; her daughter-in-law Mary; her grandchildren Maeve and Saoirse and her great-grandchildren Gideon and Josie," the family statement said.

J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE, AP

Ethel Kennedy, widow of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, watches a video about her late husband during the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights awards ceremony on Capitol Hill in Washington on June 5, 2018.

She founded the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights soon after husband's death and advocated for causes including gun control and human rights. She rarely spoke about her husband's assassination. When her filmmaker daughter, Rory, brought it up in the 2012 HBO documentary, "Ethel," she couldn't share her grief.

"When we lost Daddy ..." she began, then teared up and asked that her youngest daughter "talk about something else."

In 2008, she joined brother-in-law Ted Kennedy and niece Caroline Kennedy in endorsing Sen. Barack Obama for president, likening him to her late husband. She made several trips to the White House during the Obama years, receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2014 and meeting Pope Francis in 2015.

Many of her progeny became well known. Daughter Kathleen became lieutenant governor of Maryland; Joseph represented Massachusetts in Congress; Courtney married Paul Hill, who had been wrongfully convicted of an IRA bombing; Kerry became a human rights activist and president of the RFK center; Christopher ran for governor of Illinois; Max served as a prosecutor in Philadelphia; and Douglas reported for Fox News Channel.

Her son Robert F. Kennedy Jr. also became a national figure, although not as a liberal in the family tradition.

First known as an environmental lawyer, he evolved into a conspiracy theorist who spread false theories about vaccines.

He ran for president this year as an independent after briefly challenging President Joe Biden, and his name remains on ballots in multiple states after he suspended his campaign and endorsed Donald Trump.

Ethel Kennedy did not comment publicly on her son's actions, although several other family members denounced him.

Decades earlier, she seemed to thrive on her in-laws' rising power. She was an enthusiastic backer of JFK's 1960 run and during the Kennedy administration hosted some of the era's most well-attended parties at their Hickory Hill estate in McLean, Virginia, including one where historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. was pushed fully clothed into the swimming pool. In the Kennedy spirit, she also was known as an avid and highly competitive tennis player and a compulsive planner.

Kennedy was born Ethel Skakel on April 11, 1928, in Chicago, the sixth of seven children of coal magnate George Skakel and Ann Brannack Skakel, a devout Roman Catholic.

She grew up in a 31-room English country manor house in Greenwich, Connecticut, and attended Greenwich Academy before graduating from the Convent of the Sacred Heart in the Bronx in 1945.

She met Robert Kennedy through his sister Jean, her roommate at Manhattanville College in New York. They moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he finished his last year of law school at the University of Virginia, and then in 1957, they bought Hickory Hill from by John and Jacqueline Kennedy, who had bought it in 1953.

Robert Kennedy became chief counsel to the Senate Select Committee in 1957. He later was appointed attorney general by his brother, the newly elected President Kennedy.

She had supported her husband in his successful 1964 campaign for the U.S. Senate in New York and his subsequent presidential bid. Pregnant with their 11th child when he was gunned down by Sirhan Sirhan, her look of shock and horror was captured by photographers in images that remained indelible decades later.

Milton

From A1

Tom Reynolds, 90, spent Thursday morning sweeping out 4 feet of mud and water and collecting chunks of aluminum siding torn off by the twister, which also picked up a car and threw it across the road.

Reynolds said he planned to repair the home he built three decades ago. "What else am I going to do?" he said.

Elsewhere on the island, a house was blown into a street, temporarily blocking it. Some structures caught fire.

City workers on Anna Maria Island were grateful not to be wading through floodwaters as they picked up debris Thursday morning, two weeks after Helene battered buildings and blew in piles of sand up to 6 feet tall. Those piles may have helped shield homes from further damage, said Jeremi Roberts of the State Emergency Response Team.

"I'm shocked it's not more," city worker Kati Sands said as she cleared the streets of siding and broken lights. "We lost so much with Helene, there wasn't much left."

Helene flooded streets and homes in western Florida and left at least 230 people dead across the South. In many places along the coast, municipalities raced to collect and dispose of debris before Milton's winds and storm surge could toss it around and compound any damage.

Power was knocked out across much of Florida. More than 3.4 million homes and businesses were without electricity, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports.

The fabric that serves as the roof of Tropicana Field — home of the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team in St. Petersburg — was ripped to shreds by fierce winds. Debris littered the field.

About 80,000 people spent the night in shelters, and thousands of others fled after authorities issued mandatory evacuation orders across 15 Florida counties with a total population of about 7.2 million people.

In Punta Gorda, a 10-foot surge from the Peace River swept into the historic district, damaging homes and depositing six boats along one riverside street.

It was the third surge to hit the neighborhood in three months.

By Thursday afternoon, Milton headed into the Atlantic Ocean as a post-tropical cyclone with winds of 75 mph — just barely hurricane force.

Harris

From A1

Now, in a tight race against Trump, she is being forced to reassess how she talks about her boss and how she might strike out on her own should she win the White House.

The first Black and South Asian woman to be a major party presidential nominee, Harris was 9 years old when Biden was elected to the Senate and was in law school when Trump, then a real estate heir and socialite, published "The Art of the Deal."

Harris, her campaign believes, embodies change. Yet, she still may need to find a better way to talk about it.

According to aides, Harris is deeply loyal to Biden and resistant to publicly doing anything that could be construed as criticizing his presidency, though his favorability ratings remain underwater.

In private, some question what she should break with Biden on — noting the popularity of some of the biggest pieces of his legislative agenda, from infrastructure to lowering the costs of some prescription drugs, and the recklessness of signaling any daylight with the president on foreign policy at a time of global crises.

Harris was a central partner to Biden throughout, and they worry a break now could be viewed as election opportunism.

Views of Biden are still more negative than positive, even after he withdrew as the Democratic nominee in July.

About 4 in 10 Americans had a somewhat or very favorable view of Biden in an AP-NORC poll conducted in September, and 55% had an unfavorable view, which is consistent with where his favorability ratings have stood for the past two years.

Feelings toward Harris, meanwhile, were warmer — half of Americans had a favorable opinion of her, while 44% had an unfavorable opinion.

In addition to her pledge to put a Republican in her Cabinet, Harris introduced some policies distinct from Biden — including calling for a smaller hike to the capital gains tax than advocated for by the president. But they have been modest, and Biden's White House, in turn, has quickly signed on to her positions.

Trump seized on her comments that she couldn't think of any decision by Biden that she would change, playing a clip of "The View" appearance at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania on Wednesday to roars from the crowd.

"Her answer that she would do nothing different is disqualifying," he said in Reading.

Some Harris allies have pressed her to more forcefully signal a break from Biden.

"She should do what's best," former Harris communications director Jamal Simmons said.

"Winning will make Joe Biden feel a lot better than anything else."

Biden is "an unpopular president in a global anti-incumbent mood," added Democratic strategist Alyssa Cass, adding that the small universe of undecided voters is particularly not enthralled by Biden.

Harris, she said, needs to "communicate clearly to voters something she would have done differently that is acknowledging some of the dissatisfaction that they have — rightly or wrongly — as a way to move them to be fully comfortable with her."

The first vice president to mount a bid to replace a leader of their party in almost a quarter century, Harris is trying to strike a delicate balance.

Harris' team has tried to keep Biden at a distance on the campaign trail — the pair have held only a single campaign event together — yet she has been pulled into appearing by his side to monitor hurricanes and address emergencies in the Middle East.

Harris' challenge is not unique, though the compressed nature of her campaign after Biden's exit is undoubtedly a complicating factor not faced in the modern era.

In 2000, the then-Democratic nominee, Vice President Al Gore, maintained an arm's-length relationship with a scandal-tarred President Bill Clinton after he faced a high-profile impeachment over his affair with a White House intern and attempts to cover it up.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan, then 78, did not campaign aggressively for his vice president and eventual successor, George H.W. Bush.

"Vice presidents have always struggled with how to separate themselves from incumbent presidents," said Republican strategist Alex Conant. "It's why so few of them win."

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