

EDNA L. SAFFY 1935-2010

# Human rights activist founded NOW chapters

She was a long-time, very active supporter of women's liberation.

By **JESSIE-LYNNE KERR**  
The Times-Union

Edna L. Saffy was such a leader in the women's rights movement that she told a reporter in 1985 that she wanted to see the wording of the Declaration of Independence

changed to read, "All *people* are created equal ..."

Dr. Saffy, human rights activist, retired college professor and founder of NOW chapters in Jacksonville and Gainesville, died at her Jacksonville home Sunday morning after a year-long battle with brain cancer. She was 75.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

In addition to her work for women's rights, Dr. Saffy was

a member of the Duval County Democratic Executive Committee for 35 years. In 1991, during the campaign for the 1992 Democratic presidential primary, she hosted Bill Clinton at her Southside home. Active in Mideast peace groups and a member of the American Arab Institute, she later made at least five trips to the Clinton White House, including being invited

**SAFFY** continues on **A-7**



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# Saffy

Continued from A-1

by the president to witness the signing of the Mid-East Peace Accord in 1993.

Dr. Saffy was recognized for her human rights efforts by being named "a woman of courage and vision" in 2001 by the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women during Women's History Month.

In 2005, Dr. Saffy was presented an EVE lifetime achievement award, one of just a dozen bestowed since it was instituted in 1987.

At the presentation, EVE award coordinator Carolyn Gentry said, "For more than 30 years, Dr. Edna Saffy has championed the cause for woman and equal rights. As Gloria Steinem said of her, 'Edna always makes it happen.'"

As a leader in the early women's liberation movement, it was not unusual for Dr. Saffy to share a podium with fellow activists Steinem, Jane Fonda, Betty Friedan or Eleanor Smeal.

In 1975, she was a key organizer of a march on the state capitol in Tallahassee in support of the Equal Rights Amendment, leading a group of women estimated at 3,000. The amendment passed in the state House in both 1975 and 1977, but it failed by a few votes in the state Senate and never gained approval in enough state legislatures to become part of the Constitution.

Losing the struggle for the ERA hurt, Dr. Saffy admitted in a 2005 interview with The Times-Union, but it was a battle worth fighting, one that helped change hearts and minds and open up opportunities for women.

"It broke our hearts and it almost broke our backs," she said. "But we had changed the world through our fight."

The Jacksonville native graduated from Lee High School before heading to the University of Florida in 1953 where she wanted to study to become a doctor. A man who was her academic adviser laughed that off, saying, "Honey, girls don't go to medical school."

She told a reporter in 2005 that she was so shocked by his condescending attitude toward women that she packed her bags and quit school without bothering to officially withdraw. That caused her a problem a decade later when she sought to re-enroll at UF. Because she had not officially

withdrawn earlier, she had only failing grades on her record and no one would let her enroll. She finally found a sympathetic professor who gave her a second chance. She proved him right by earning straight As.

In 1967 she earned her bachelor's degree and the next year received her master's degree in rhetoric and public address. She went to work as an English and speech instructor at what is now Florida State College at Jacksonville in 1968. She taught speech and oral communication at the college until she retired at the end of 2007 and was named professor emeritus.

Dr. Saffy returned to Gainesville in 1972 to work on her doctorate and founded a NOW chapter there, two years after she and some friends had founded the Jacksonville chapter.

She also led two years of intense fighting to get Florida Blue Key, the UF mechanism for bringing people to political power in the state, to admit women, which it finally did when threatened with loss of state funding. Among her many honors, she was inducted into UF Hall of Fame, 1973-74.

Her public service included mayoral appointments to the Duval County Hospital Authority, Jacksonville Human Rights Commission, advisory committee on LaVilla Cultural Heritage District and the Jacksonville Area Planning Board. She also was appointed by President Clinton to the Advisory Committee on the Arts of the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in 1995-2001, and by President Gerald Ford in 1976 as a Florida delegate to the International Women's Conference. She was a Florida State delegate to Democratic National Conventions in 1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, 1996 and 2000.

Dr. Saffy also served as president of the Florida Women's Political Caucus and founder of the Jacksonville Women's Network. She was active with numerous groups including Planned Parenthood, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Society, Hubbard House, Karpeles Manuscript Museum and the American Association of University Women.

She is survived by her husband of 41 years, Grady E. Johnson Jr., and her brother, Ralph Daumit Saffy of Jacksonville.

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