



Mary Lou (Louise) Munts

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KENNETT SQUARE, Pa. / MADISON - Mary Louise Munts, a lifelong crusader for equal rights for minorities and women, who served for 12 years as a Democratic legislator in the Wisconsin Assembly and was the first woman to lead the state's public service commission, died on Dec. 22, 2013. She was 89, and had been suffering from vascular dementia and her second bout with breast cancer. She died at Kendal-Longwood, a Quaker retirement community in Kennett Square, Pa.

Mary Lou's deep commitment to civil rights, social justice and politics began long before her professional career and continued after retirement, but her tireless energy wasn't confined to the public sector. She was voracious and passionate about everything she valued: gardening, art, good food and wine, books, playing games, travel, and the family and friends she loved so dearly.

She grew up in the Chicago area, the oldest of two children, and felt she and her brother shared an idyllic life in the summer on Lake Michigan in the Indiana Dunes. She attributed her intellectual self-confidence to "all the encouragement my father gave me. He trained me to analyze and to argue. My mother had the harder job of taming a super-active child... My parents had both been high achievers in school and were a hard act to follow. My brother is the creative one. I turned more toward the world of people and action."

Her civil rights activism, political interests, and leadership qualities emerged early. At a student leadership training institute on Campobello Island, she was inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt. She dropped out of Swarthmore College in 1944 to run the student campaign for her political science professor, finishing her undergraduate work and receiving her master's degree in economics from the University of Chicago, where she met Ray Munts, who she married in 1947.

During her early years of raising a family, she was glad she didn't have the pressure of a career: "I loved that period and made the most of it," she later recalled. But she always stayed involved in public and community life, building a new Democratic Party in Wisconsin in the early 1950's, then leading efforts to desegregate public accommodations and promote fair housing in the suburbs after moving with her family to the Washington, D.C. area.

Although she'd been at it her whole life, Mary Lou officially entered politics in middle age. Battling her grief over the death of her teenage son shortly after the family moved back to Madison, she started law school at the University of Wisconsin at age 46, and then interrupted her studies to win a seat in the Wisconsin Assembly in 1972.

Asked what it was like to be a woman legislator, she replied: "When we were only 7 out of 132, obviously we couldn't afford to be mediocre!"

She was the first woman to chair the Joint Finance Committee, but her record as a legislator went far beyond budgetary issues. Her drive and her consensus building talents produced many legislative successes, including divorce reform, marital property reform, solid and hazardous waste legislation, and reform of antitrust and mental health laws. In 1980, the Isthmus weekly newspaper surveyed Madison political insiders and wrote: "She's easily the most admired because of her diligence, patience, vision, and sense of the possible."

She retired from the Assembly to accept an appointment by Governor Tony Earl as the first woman on Wisconsin's Public Service Commission, where she became a leader in energy conservation efforts.

She was a member of the board of the Energy Foundation and a member of the national board of Common Cause. She served for ten years as co-chair of Wisconsin Common Cause, and was active as a lay minister and on the Social Justice Committee of the First Unitarian Society. And she helped Monona Terrace, Madison's civic center first proposed and designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1939, become a reality through her leadership on the founding commission,

In December of 1999, hundreds crowded into a 75th birthday party for Mary Lou. "Words like 'tireless' and 'incredibly effective' floated among the red and white balloons," reported the Wisconsin State Journal. Jonathan Barry, who served with her in the legislature, summed it up for everyone: "She's just a Wisconsin gem."

Mary Louise was preceded in death by her husband, Raymond Munts, in 1992, and her first son, Roger, in 1967. Her brother, Thomas Rogers died in 2007. She is survived, and celebrated, by three adoring children, Lisa (Tom) Redburn, Polly Talen, and Andrew (Laura) Munts; by seven adoring grandchildren, Jeremy (Jennie), Emily, Eliza, Lydia, Grace, Margaret, and Matthew; by a loving extended family and many dear friends.

A Friends' Meeting was held at Kendal on Dec. 27, 2013, and a memorial service will take place at the First Unitarian Society in Madison, Wis., during daffodil season in April.

In her memory, Mary Louise would encourage you to give generously to organizations that support social justice, environmental stewardship, education, and the arts.