



InSight

WITH DR. GLORIA C. DUFFY
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The Greatest Generation Were Women, Too

It's not everyone who has a best friend for 75 years, but that was the case for my mom, Gloria Senior. And when she lost her life-long pal, Ollie Marie-Victoire, in August, our family and many others lost a role model for how to be a strong, principled woman.

Mom and Ollie met in 1936 at age 13, in ballet class in Denver, Colorado. They lived not far from one another, and both attended Catholic schools. When they became friends, their mothers – both strong single parents – also became close, another friendship that lasted for decades. Mom and Ollie had many stories about one another as girls and young women; Ollie was still professed to be puzzled 75 years later about why my mom would have frankly thrown Ollie's clothes up in a tree on one of their walks home.

Ollie continued dancing, first with the Denver Ballet, and then briefly with the San Francisco Ballet, after she graduated from Denver University, married and moved here in 1946 with her husband Georges Marie-Victoire. My mom came west soon after, taking a job as a broadcaster with KNBC Radio in San Francisco, and their friendship continued.

Ollie went to work as a legal secretary for a San Francisco firm, and the partners were so impressed that they urged her to attend law school. She graduated with honors from Hastings, clerked for a California Supreme Court Justice, founded her own law firm, and in 1974 Governor Reagan appointed her to the San Francisco Municipal Court bench. Subsequently elected three times, she was one of San Francisco's first female – and longest-serving – Superior Court Judges.

As a judge, Ollie was known for her profound dedication to equal protection under the law. Among her most notable rulings was her 1975 dismissal of more than 100 charges brought by the district attorney in San Francisco against prostitutes. She argued that the San Francisco police were prosecuting female prostitutes but not their male customers, and thus applying the law unequally and discriminatorily. Though local prosecutors had Ollie disqualified from hearing cases against female prostitutes, her position was upheld by courts in California and other states, and led to the arrest and prosecution of not only the johns soliciting prostitution, but pimps and others involved in the prostitution business.

Ollie's commitment to equal rights extended outside the courtroom. In another dramatic step, she and Acting San Francisco Mayor Dorothy

von Beroldingen challenged male social clubs that did not comply with equal rights laws and refused to serve women or admit them as members. On September 16, 1976, Ollie and von Beroldingen arrived at the males-only dining room of the Commercial Club at 465 California Street in San Francisco and asked to be served. They were refused service, while 100 women demonstrated outside, and news coverage of their "meal" of bread and water, while waiting vainly to be served, dramatized the issue. In succeeding years, courts decided against discrimination by private clubs, including a 1987 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that states could require such clubs to admit women and minorities.

A prominent figure in the San Francisco legal community, Ollie administered the oath of office to Supervisor Harvey Milk. She served as presiding judge of the Superior Court and was instrumental in the construction of the new courthouse building at 400 McAllister Street.

Ollie's softer side was evident as she performed numerous marriages, with a twinkle in her eye always pronouncing the newly marrieds "wife and husband," and held in her lap the babies brought into the courtroom by plaintiffs and defendants. Her own marriage, to a dashing French aviator she (and my mom) met at a USO dance in Denver during WW II, lasted 62 years until his death a few years ago.

Ollie retired from the bench in 1994, but she continued to sit almost full-time as an assigned judge until her eightieth year.

An only child, Ollie was raised during the Depression in Denver, Wyoming and New Mexico by her hard-working, strict and loving mother, laying the groundwork for her strong sense of justice and advocacy for women.

Strong and decisive to the end, when she received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in July at the age of 88, she decided she had had a good life, opted against treatment, used her remaining time to visit with family and friends, and planned her own warm, and typically modest, memorial service.

A Republican, Ollie was tough on criminals, and imbued with core conservative values of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. And yet she strongly advocated the equal rights of women and other groups. Among the many inspirations I took from her is that equal rights under the law are an absolute commitment that knows no political or party affiliation. That is an important message, in these times. 🌿

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