SAPINSLEY, LILA 12-10-14

SAPINSLEY, LILA
MANFIELD

92, former RI Senate Minority leader, Public Utilities Commissioner, Chairwoman of the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation and an early champion of women's issues and transparency in government, died suddenly at home in Providence on December 9th.

Vigorous until the end, she tutored and mentored children, and had recently weighed in on local politics by both public debate and the written word. As a legacy, she leaves an entire generation of women politicians in RI. She was active in countless organizations that served her community including Trinity Repertory Company, Butler Hospital, Providence Public Library, RI Board of Regents, Dorcas' Place, American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood of RI and Wellesley College, to name a few.

She was predeceased by her husband of 69 years, John M. Sapinsley, and she is survived by 4 daughters, Jill Mooney (James), Carol Rubenstein (Alan), Joan Sapinsley (Richard Lewis) and Pat Sapinsley (Harold Levy) and 9 beloved grandchildren.

The funeral will be Friday December 12 at 11am at Temple Beth El, 70 Orchard Ave. The family will receive visitors at Laurelmead, 355 Blackstone Blvd. from 4pm -6pm on Friday. In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made to the Lila Sapinsley Fund at Inspiring Minds, 763 Westminster Street Providence, RI 02903 or www.inspiringsmindsri.org for the purpose of continuing her work to mentor young girls.

NEWS DIGEST

PASSAGES

State flags at half-staff for Sapinsley

In honor of Lila M. Sapinsley, who died Tuesday at age 92, Governor Chafee has ordered Rhode Island flags flown at half-staff from sunrise to sunset Friday.

As Senate minority leader, Sapinsley was the first woman to hold a leadership post in the Rhode Island General Assembly. She is credited with blazing a path for women in R.I. politics.

DONITA NAYLOR

editorial Page 12-16-14

Lila Sapinsley, 1922-2014

With the passing of Lila Sapinsley last week at 92, Rhode Island lost an incomparable and gifted leader. As a member of the General Assembly, Ms. Sapinsley rose to become Senate minority leader, the first woman to hold such a high office in the state.

Born Lila Manfield in Chicago, Ms. Sapinsley was married for nearly 70 years to John Sapinsley, who in 2012 preceded her in death. After exchanging vows in Virginia, the public-spirited couple settled in Rhode Island. Soon, Ms. Sapinsley became immersed in local politics. She went from the envelope-stuffing considered suitable for women in the 1950s to winning her own Senate seat, in 1972.

At the time, female politicians were still considered suspect. Ms. Sapinsley had her work cut out for her in proving that she belonged in office and could handle the issues as intelligently as men. She brought important new energy to women's causes, pushing against onerous restrictions on abortion and fighting for equal access to financial credit. An independent turned Republican, she also fought against the Democratic machine that continues to dominate the General Assembly. Lila Sapinsley crusaded for open meetings and sponsored ethics legislation, bringing much-needed pressure to bear on an insular government.

As a political role model for women, Ms. Sapinsley had few peers. But she became a valued mentor for men as well, inspiring talented Rhode Islanders of both sexes to enter public life. Gina Raimondo sought Ms. Sapinsley's advice in 2010, when she was weighing a run for treasurer. Gov. Lincoln Chafee and Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian are among the many who credit Ms. Sapinsley with offering valuable guidance.

In addition to serving in the Assembly, Lila Sapinsley helped to found the Community College of Rhode Island. She was the first woman to lead the Board of Trustees of State Colleges, and in 1986 she was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

Two years earlier, Ms. Sapinsley made an unsuccessful run for lieutenant governor. It was perhaps a case of having been born too soon: a few years later, she might easily have won. She never gave up on politics, however; as recently as this past fall, she campaigned for Catherine Taylor, another Republican woman seeking the lieutenant governor's post. Though Ms. Taylor lost, she would surely say that she was in fine company. Lila Sapinsley served with honor, opening important doors for women and making Rhode Island a better place.

Teenager witnessed Sapinsley's compassion

I try to cast myself back to the late 1960s, when I first met Lila Sapinsley as a family friend. I was a teenager and those weren't easy times anywhere. The Vietnam War — mainly because of the draft — pulled families straight into a ferocious national debate at the same time racial unrest was bubbling at the surface.

The Sapinsley household, thanks to Lila and her dear husband, John, was an oasis of calm. Mrs. Sapinsley hadn't even started her life in politics. I never thought of her then as anything other than a warm, involved and caring mother. The word that now comes to mind: a humanist.

She was unfailingly compassionate and willing to allow that we had a point, even as rebellious teenagers: our democracy needed improvement.

She had a solid grounding and common sense, she and John had a loving relationship filled with humor, and it couldn't help but impress the teenagers in the house. There really wasn't much that flummoxed her. She was an optimist, a realist and problem-solver at heart. What an example of a good life.

Godspeed, Lila Sapinsley.

Alan Farago
Coral Gables, Fla.

Rhode Island has lost political leader, icon

Rhode Island has lost a political and community icon ("Lawmaker Sapinsley blazed a path for women," Dec. 10). Lila Sapinsley opened the doors for women and served as a mentor to many, including me.

Sapinsley was a dynamic and brilliant leader. She was savvy, honest and forthright. She taught me the importance of being involved in the legislative process and the role of advocacy. She leaves a legacy and is a model for those pursuing public office.

It was an honor for me to be nominated by her to serve on the first Rhode Island Conflict of Interest Commission, which she supported. This commission paved the way for the current Rhode Island Ethics Commission and the ethics commissions in cities and towns.

Miriam R. Plitt
Pawtucket