



Heroes

of the

Presidential Medal of Freedom



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The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest civilian award in the United States. Recipients are chosen by the President “for especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, or world peace, or cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.”

The National First Ladies’ Library exhibit, *Heroes of the Presidential Medal of Freedom*, pays tribute to fourteen women who won this prestigious award for their career and life work on behalf of our country. They did not set out to win any awards, but have made the most of their life journeys. They are all very different and special women, and their life accomplishments are worth celebrating.

Lady Bird Johnson (1912 - 2007)

First Lady, 1963 – 1969

Presidential Medal of Freedom received January 10, 1977

Medal category: United States First Ladies



Lady Bird Johnson

Courtesy Johnson Presidential Library

By the time Lady Bird Johnson became First Lady, she had been a powerhouse behind her husband's successful political career for almost thirty years. From the start of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, she was a staunch supporter for civil rights, championed his efforts on the War on Poverty, and became the National Chair for the Head Start Program in 1965 – a program that is vital to this day. Another lasting legacy of Mrs. Johnson's was her beautification program. Inspired by her natural interest in landscape, she started a Beautification Committee in 1964 using the urban blight in Washington, DC as an example for restoring parks, playgrounds and schools into attractive areas for enjoyment and well-being. She eventually took her beautification campaign to the highways and National Parks across the country. She won her Medal of Freedom in 1977 for causes during her tenure as First Lady. Lady Bird continued her legacy for beautification in 1982 when she donated land and money to open the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin, Texas. It is known today as the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Betty Ford (1918 -)

First Lady, 1974 – 1977

Presidential Medal of Freedom received November 18, 1991

Medal category: United States First Ladies

On September 4, 1974 the nation's new First Lady, Betty Ford, announced at a press conference that she would support the Equal Rights Amendment and that she also favored the legal abortion decision of the Supreme Court. But several weeks later those controversial topics were overshadowed by the disclosure that Mrs. Ford had undergone a mastectomy at Walter Reed Hospital. The news was not only unprecedented about a private illness, but breast cancer awareness would turn into a life long cause for Betty Ford. Realizing the power she held as First Lady, Mrs. Ford turned her attention to passing the Equal Rights Amendment. President Ford designated 1975 as International Women's Year at the urging of his wife. That same year the opinionated and outspoken First Lady delivered a memorable speech on gender equality. She stated in part..."my own support of the Equal Rights Amendment has shown what happens when a definition of proper behavior collides with the right of an individual to personal opinions. I do not believe that being First Lady should prevent me from expressing my views. I spoke out on this important issue because of my deep personal convictions. Why should my husband's job or yours prevent us from being ourselves? Being ladylike does not require silence. The Equal Rights Amendment...will help knock



Betty Ford

Courtesy Ford Presidential Library

down those restrictions that have locked women in old stereotypes of behavior and opportunity.” Betty continued to tackle issue after issue after her White House Years including Breast Cancer Awareness, the ERA as well as lesser known causes. But again, Betty’s personal life directed her to a cause that would be associated with her name. The Betty Ford Center is the result of her own struggle to overcome drug and alcohol abuse. During her own treatment, Mrs. Ford became aware there was no facility devoted to help with the unique problems women face in combating chemical addiction. The Betty Ford Center strongly supports women with chemical dependencies and half the space of the Center is always reserved for women. Mrs. Ford remains chairman emeritus of the Betty Ford Center and she donates all royalties from two of her published books to the center that bears her name.



Barbara Bush, Betty Ford and George H. W. Bush
Courtesy Ford Presidential Library

Rosalynn Carter (1927-)



Rosalynn Carter

Courtesy Carter Presidential Library

First Lady, 1977 – 1981

Presidential Medal of Freedom received August 9, 1999

Medal category: United States First Ladies

Young and observant Rosalynn Smith realized how difficult it was for a person to live with a mental or physical disability. Many years later as First Lady of Georgia, Rosalynn Carter was in a position to do something about it – and she did. Rosalynn overhauled that state’s mental health system. When Jimmy Carter ran for President, Rosalynn became the first candidate’s wife to make a campaign promise. She would work to reform legislation on behalf of the mentally ill. As First Lady she became Active Chair of the President’s Commission on Mental Health in February of 1977. In September 1980 the Mental Health System Act was passed and funded by the United States Senate. Mrs. Carter went into the White House as her husband’s partner, consulted on his domestic and foreign policies, and was invited by her husband to sit in on Cabinet Meetings. She traveled at the request of her husband across the nation on domestic issues and to foreign countries to meet heads of state, making her an invaluable member of the Carter Administration. Besides her passion to make life better for the mentally disabled, Mrs. Carter’s domestic project to aid the nation’s elderly led to a number of changes in including

passage of the Age Discrimination Act in Congress. She supported the Equal Rights Amendment and made appearances in states to encourage its ratification. In 1977 she joined Lady Bird Johnson and Betty Ford for the opening of the Women's Conference in Houston, Texas. Rosalynn continues to be effective as a former First Lady. She chairs the International Committee of Women Leaders for mental health. She is on the board of directors for the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving at Georgia Southwestern University. Mrs. Carter created and chairs the Carter Center's Mental Health Task Force and hosts the annual Rosalynn Carter Symposium on Mental Policy. To combat the stigma associated with mental illness, she started awarding Rosalynn Carter Fellowships on Mental Health Journalism. Other highly visible projects through the Carter Center include Habitat for Humanity where volunteers build homes for the needy and Project Interconnection that provides housing for the homeless who are mentally ill. Mrs. Carter joins her husband through the Carter Center to advocate for peace and to fight disease throughout the world.



Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter
Courtesy Clinton Presidential Library

Nancy Reagan (1921 -)

First Lady, 1981 – 1989

Presidential Medal of Freedom received July 9, 2002

Medal category: United States First Ladies

In 1994 when former President Ronald Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, the Reagans created the Ronald and Nancy Reagan Research Institute in Chicago to research the illness. But it was Nancy Reagan who won the hearts of the nation in her role as primary care giver to her husband. It was a role she had played in many capacities over her entire marriage. As First Lady of California, Mrs. Reagan focused her eight year tenure on assisting Vietnam War veterans who were wounded, prisoners of war, or missing in action. Nancy's Foster Grandparent Program was also initiated during that time and gained national attention during her years in the White House. When Mrs. Reagan became First Lady of the United States, "Just Say No" became a phrase most notably attributed to her in her quest to alert the nation and the world to the dangers of chemical abuse among children and young adults. Her absolutely tireless work brought about an anti-drug abuse bill signed into law by President Reagan in 1986. Nancy became the first First Lady to address the General Assembly of the United Nations when she spoke about the problem of international drug interdiction and trafficking laws.



Nancy Reagan

Chief Wilma Mankiller (1945 - 2010)



Wilma Mankiller
LOC, LC-DIG-ppmsca-12913

First Woman Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation
Presidential Medal of Freedom received January 15, 1998
Medal category: Foreign Head of State or Government

In 1838 the Cherokee Nation was forced to give up ancestral lands in Northern Georgia and relocate to the Oklahoma territory. This horrific journey became known as “The Trail of Tears” from the translation of the Cherokee, Nunna daul Tsuny (The Trail Where They Cried). Wilma Mankiller and her poverty-stricken family suffered their own personal “Trail of Tears” when they left Mankiller Flats and moved to San Francisco as part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Relocation Program in 1956. Her Indian heritage and natural political activism reawakened with a vengeance when she visited the Indian occupation of the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island in 1969. Chief Mankiller returned to her family’s Oklahoma land in 1977 and became the Cherokee Nation’s first Community Development Director, initiating projects such as improved water systems and housing development. Elected as Deputy Chief in 1983, Wilma filled the Principal Chief vacancy two years later when Ross Swimmer left to become Director of the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. She decided to run for Principal Chief in the 1987 election and became the first Cherokee woman in modern history to lead a major Native American tribe. With her exuberant determination she doubled employment, built health care centers and established children’s programs for the Cherokee Nation. In 1990 she signed an agreement with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to take direct control of federal funding for the tribe. She retired from office in 1995, and dedicated her life to volunteering and teaching about Cherokee history and values.

Marian Anderson (1897-1993)



Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson
Courtesy Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

Contralto Singer

Presidential Medal of Freedom received December 6,
1963

Medal category: Music

In 1939 Marian Anderson became a major focus of the struggle against racial prejudice when First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned her membership from the Daughters of the American Revolution. The First Lady was protesting the DAR decision to ban the African American singer from performing a concert in Constitution Hall. By the 1930s Ms. Anderson was already a world renowned contralto and regarded as the 20th century's most celebrated classical singer. In Europe her race was not an issue, but in the United States after concerts where she accepted standing ovations, this gentle, private woman endured the indignities thrust upon her race by hotels where she stayed.

She was forced to take the freight elevator to her room where she also ate her meals so that her presence in the hotel's dining room wouldn't upset the white guests. But in 1955 she realized a personal dream and became the first African American woman to perform with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Marian later served as a delegate to the United Nations at the request of President Eisenhower in 1958.

Dr. Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978)

Anthropologist

Presidential Medal of Freedom received January 19, 1979 (Posthumously)

Medal category: Science / Anthropology

Margaret Mead was a pioneer in the field of anthropology, the study of human nature. She is credited with “inventing” one of the subfields of anthropology called ethnology – or the study of social behavior, including the ways in which people cope with change, undergo cultural upheaval and how individuals mature. When Margaret left for the Admiralty Islands in 1926 to do field work among the Samoan people, she was a young woman trailblazing in a man’s discipline. Her technique was unconventional for the time; she lived, dressed and worked beside the people she studied. Her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, was an instant best-seller when published in 1928. One of the book’s highly controversial findings was Dr. Mead’s detailed observation that “straitlaced sex attitudes might be relaxed without accepting promiscuity” within modern society. Her boundless energy made her a champion of the human condition. She was utterly dedicated to a greater understanding and acceptance of all individuals throughout the world.



Margaret Mead
Courtesy Sevanne Kassarian

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986)

Artist

Presidential Medal of Freedom received January 10, 1977

Medal category: Art



Georgia O'Keeffe

*Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library,
Yale University*

After college Georgia O'Keeffe became an art teacher even though she aspired to have a career as a professional artist. So Georgia continued to paint...secretly. Photographer Alfred Stieglitz, later her husband, became an early champion of her work and that eventually led to Georgia's first solo show held in his New York gallery in 1917. Georgia's love of travel took her to New Mexico, which became her permanent home in 1949. It was here that some of her most popular works of animal skulls, flowers and hills were painted, always in unique perspective and at times in abstract form. Ms. O'Keeffe's paintings are full of wonderful color, but the artist chose to wear only black and white clothing. Wearing color would have been a distraction for the artist because all other colors deeply affected her no matter the size of the canvas she was painting. She received many awards during her long life, including her Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 when she was nearing 90 years of age and almost completely blind. Georgia remains the first and only female artist to receive this prestigious medal. Her paintings continue to inspire people throughout the world.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (1930-)

Associate US Supreme Court Justice, 1981-2006
Presidential Medal of Freedom received August 12, 2009
Medal category: United States Supreme Court Justice

Though Justice Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to receive a Presidential Medal of Freedom award in 2009 for her service as a Supreme Court Justice, this honor is one of many "firsts" for this trailblazing woman. But back in 1952 when Sandra was a fresh law school graduate from Stanford University, the only job offered to her was legal secretary. She found that work in public-service offered the best opportunities for a female lawyer, and came to realize that this area was also her passion. She was quickly promoted to deputy county attorney, and she never looked back. In 1969 she was appointed to the Arizona State Senate, and in 1973 became the first woman to serve as majority leader of a state Senate. Justice O'Connor was serving on the Arizona Court of Appeals when President Reagan announced that she was his appointee to a new vacancy on the Supreme Court in 1981. On September 25, Sandra Day O'Connor became the 102nd person to sit on the Supreme Court of the United States and the first woman in its 191-year history.



Justice
Sandra Day O'Connor

Martha Graham (1894 - 1991)



Martha Graham

LOC, LC-USZ62-42500 DLC

Modern Dance Choreographer
Presidential Medal of Freedom received October 14, 1976
Medal category: Dance

When Martha Graham received her Medal of Freedom award in 1976, one of her devoted fans and former students who sat proudly in the audience was the First Lady of the United States, Betty Ford. Martha was the first dancer to receive the Medal of Freedom – a distinction that was one of many firsts she attained in her lifetime. Martha wanted to explore and communicate through dance the human experience and emotional language; it was an innovative idea never before expressed. She loved to read stories of ancient cultures, and the pageantry of the Catholic mass had made a deep impression on her as a child; she used these and other influences to choreograph a new and unique form of dance. In 1937 she was the first American dancer to perform at the White House by personal invitation of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

Marian Wright Edelman (1939-)

Founder of the Children's Defense Fund
Presidential Medal of Freedom received August 9, 2000
Medal category: Activism

Marian Wright Edelman graduated from Yale Law School in 1963 determined to serve disadvantaged children. The first step was to be the first African American woman admitted to the bar in the state of Mississippi. There she traveled throughout the state setting up Head Start Programs and running the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund as she promoted civil rights. Eventually Marian started an anti-poverty advocacy organization in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) was established in 1973 as a nonprofit organization to provide a voice for children who have no voice in government but are affected by its laws. Another young woman law student named Hillary Rodman heard Marian speak at Yale and asked to work for her. After graduating in 1972, Hillary took her first job working for the CDF, and served as chair for its board until her husband's candidacy for president in 1992. Secretary of State Clinton considers Ms. Edelman "an important mentor" in her life. Edelman continues to devote her life on behalf of children: "Service is the rent you pay for living, not something you do in your spare time."



Hillary Clinton and Marian Wright Edelman
Courtesy Clinton Presidential Library

Annie Wauneka (1910 - 1997)

First Navajo Tribal Councilwoman

Presidential Medal of Freedom received December 6, 1963

Medal category: Humanitarian

Clan relationships are an important part of an individual's bond to the entire Navajo people. Annie Wauneka's maternal clan was the Tsé nįjikiní Diné é (Cliff Dwellers People Clan); the Ma'ıideeshgiizhnii Diné é (Coyote Pass People Clan) was her paternal clan. Annie was a unique woman among the Diné (the name the Navajo people call themselves). She was the daughter of Henry "Chee" Dodge, a powerful & influential Navajo leader. Chee Dodge lived in one of the few houses on the Navajo reservation; government officials from across the nation stayed at his home. Annie learned to speak English in addition to Navajo – extremely rare for any female at the time. In 1951 with the encouragement of her husband George, she ran for the Navajo Tribal Council. She tirelessly served on this council until 1978. While serving on the council, Annie raised nine children & continued to pursue her own education. She was appointed the chair of the newly formed Health & Welfare section of the Community Services Committee, which arose out of the tuberculosis crisis on the reservation. In addition to eradicating TB, she also sought improvements in the quality of life for the Navajo people by upgrading sanitary water conditions & lowering the infant mortality rate. To prepare Navajo children for public schooling, Dr. Wauneka supported the Head Start Program where children learned both English & their native language. In order to promote better health care, she traveled the 24,000 remote miles of the Navajo reservation to personally deliver her message. She gave over two dozen speeches in Washington, DC on behalf of the Navajo Nation. The Diné people knew her as 'Asdzání béesh baąh dah si'ání - Councilwoman and/or those who wear "Leadership Badge."



Annie Wauneka
*Courtesy Johnson
Presidential Library*

Eunice Shriver (1921-2009)

Founder of Special Olympics
Presidential Medal of Freedom received March 26, 1984
Medal category: Humanitarian

Eunice Kennedy Shriver understood firsthand the problems of acceptance in society for the intellectually challenged – her older sister, Rosemary Kennedy, was “mentally retarded” and served as her inspiration.



Eunice Shriver

Courtesy Reagan Presidential Library

When she took over the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation in 1957, she had two main objectives: “to seek the prevention of intellectual disabilities by identifying its causes, and to improve the means by which society deals with citizens who have intellectual disabilities.” Much advancement was a direct result of the lobbying efforts by Mrs. Shriver. Two examples were the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation in 1961 and the development of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development in 1962. The Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center, dedicated in Eunice’s name in 1970, was one of twelve original University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities established across the nation in 1967. But she is most recognized for founding the Special Olympics, which began in 1968 at Chicago’s Soldier Field Stadium with a few hundred spectators and 1,000 intellectually disabled athletes from 26 states and Canada. Today, more than 3 million Special Olympic athletes compete each year in all 50 states and 181 countries.

Dr. Rachel Carson (1907-1964)

Rachel Carson (1907-1964) – Marine Biologist
Presidential Medal of Freedom received June 9, 1980 (Posthumously)
Medal category: Science / Environmentalism



Rachel Carson
LOC, LC-USZ62-122633

Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, is widely credited for launching the environmental movement and is considered one of the most influential books of all time. As a biologist and gifted writer, Rachel was able to explain the dangers of untested usage of pesticides in an informative manner for a general audience. She testified before President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee in 1963 emphasizing the need for environmental protection laws. Though her book became a best-seller around the world, she did not live to see its immense impact as she lost her battle with breast cancer in 1964. She received her Medal of Freedom posthumously in 1980 from President Carter. *Silent Spring* remains a landmark in the environmental movement.

This exhibit is made possible by the following individuals and institutions:

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TOURS

All tours are guided and include both the changing exhibits at the Education & Research Center and the Saxton McKinley House, the restored Victorian home of First Lady Ida Saxton McKinley. Tours last about 1 1/2 hours.

Tour Hours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m. and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m., plus Sundays in June, July & August at 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m. **Tours Begin at the Education and Research Center, 205 Market Ave. S.**

Reservations are required for groups of six or more, recommended for all others.

\$7 adults, \$6 seniors, \$5 children under 18 - includes both buildings; \$3 Education & Research Center only

Free Parking, Buses Welcome!



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