

FRANCES HUMPHREY HOWARD

Memorial Remarks By Vivian Jenkins Nelsen

Dear Friends,

I regret missing this important event because of health problems. However, please know that we are thinking of you, Bill and Ann. I guess I thought Frances Humphrey Howard would always be here holding court in Washington. Her loss saddens us greatly. I am speaking not just for myself, but also for George, my husband. Frances and my mother were so much alike, generous Grande Dames. (pronounced the French way—Grohn Dahmes) Smart, tough, politically savvy lionesses. Queens “of all they survey.” Tough on their cubs but the most protective mothers on the planet.

I met Frances in the early eighties when she came to visit at the Humphrey Institute and I will never forget it. I was transfixed. She looked so much like Hubert that it was eerie. She even sounded like him. I staffed the Institute board and it was my responsibility to make sure that they got everything they needed. And I do mean everything. In this case, when she asked me for a great (not just good, or adequate mind you)—but a great hairdresser, I was at a loss. My beautician worked out of her basement and I couldn't see Frances in anybody's basement! So, I quickly researched the hair situation and got her to a stylist she used over the years. Only women like the two of us, who travel on their jobs, have any idea how important it is to solve this particular problem “on the road.” We started talking when I picked her up and so began my two-decade tutorial on the “Life of Hubert.”

Frances was not like other siblings of famous people; she was a star in her own right. You were nobody in Washington if you didn't get invited to one of her soirees in her sunny apartment. We were lucky enough to be included in her salons, and the people and conversations were intriguing. She was a political Pearl Mesta—people swirled around her. She was elegant and classy.

Frances was a Roosevelt Democrat and an unabashed, in-your-face-liberal. Of course, she had met and interacted with most of the political players on the national scene for many years and had many stories about them—some funny and some sad. She was full of ideas and opinions. She defined the phrase, "bigger than life." Frances was a mentor to me, and introduced me to a number of "big names." She often gave me advice for advancing my non-existent political career. I was very relieved when Bill began his, so her laser moved to him.

We had many happy times, since we shared a love of the theatre and opera. But, she was always happiest when talking about politics, her children and grand kids. She was so proud of you all. Even though she was as knowledgeable and shrewd as any political pundit, she was never cynical about politics--or for that matter--people. She was always positive and hopeful although she was willing to give hope a swift kick in the pants, if she felt the need. She was a forward-looking actor and doer.

George wants me to tell a little story about how generous Frances was. Once we were having a fancy dinner with the board and guests here at the Institute. It was the first of three fancy dinners that weekend. I had worked hard to get a famous (and pricey) florist in town to do table arrangements. I justified the cost by planning to use the flowers three times during the board's stay here. At the end of the dinner George rushed over and said, "You better get over there, Frances is giving away the flowers!" So, I leaped across the room to hear her say in her low gravelly voice, "Here darling, take these home, no point in leaving them here!" Out of her sight, I had to pry them out of the guests' hands and sneak them back on the tables. Frances was generous to a fault with her own time, money and attention.

An international activist, she was always trying to fix some problem for someone from India, or Africa or wherever. She was a patriot, and she loved our people and her country. She was a hard worker and used her career in government service to advance the cause of democracy and human decency. I will miss her. We all will. I know that she is watching us, probably holding salons with Hubert and Tip O'Neil. For sure, she is commenting on all things political with the heavenly hosts.

I am so grateful to have had her as my friend.

Thank you.