

MARYANN MAHAFFEY | 1925-2006: She spoke for those who needed a voice

Cancer claims ex-councilwoman, a politician for the people

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A champion of equal rights for women. A guardian angel of organized labor. And a voice for the poor, elderly and downtrodden.

Across the state Thursday, iconic politician Maryann Mahaffey was remembered as the embodiment of a true civil servant and the soul and conscience of a city.

Mahaffey died early Thursday at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit from complications of leukemia with her husband, Herman Dooha, and only child, Susan Dooha, at her side. She was 81 years old.

One of Detroit's longest serving politicians, Mahaffey retired in December at the end of her eighth term after revealing she was diagnosed with adult T-cell leukemia, a rare and aggressive form of cancer that is diagnosed in less than 1,000 Americans a year.

Mahaffey had been in and out of the hospital over the last year and was admitted Tuesday because of an infection that led to a systemic breakdown of her body, Susan Dooha said.

With her passing, Detroit loses a beloved leader who transcended race, gender and age with her populist appeal, shrewd politicking and no-nonsense style to become one of the city's top vote-getters.

For Detroit's poor, who make up a third of the city's population, the unions whose strength is on the wane and seniors, women and victims who find themselves at their most vulnerable, the loss of the diehard liberal Democrat is acute.

"She saw no choice but to push forward to address people's needs, to make a difference in people's lives," Dooha said Thursday. "That's the very definition of a hero -- somebody who no matter how hard the situation, runs in and doesn't give up."

On Thursday, condolences poured in from across the region, from Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick to Farmington Hills Mayor Vicki Barnett, and from throughout the state and nation, from Gov. Jennifer Granholm to members of Detroit's Washington delegation.

But Mahaffey was always a politician for the people. And Thursday, they mourned her, too.

Walter Brown, 62, lived across the street from Mahaffey. He recalled her as a down-to-earth woman who attended every summer's block party to eat barbecue and mingle with neighbors.

In return, her neighbors tried to help out when she got sick, mowing the family's lawn and shoveling their snow.

"She was a great person -- she was trying to do political work even when she was sick," Brown said. "She helped the ones who didn't have a voice. She was a fighter."

Born in Burlington, Iowa, Mahaffey moved to Detroit with her husband, Herman (Hy) Dooha, in 1952, working as a social worker and advocate in public housing, community centers and welfare rights groups.

Her entry into local politics came at a time when women were an oddity. When she ran for a Wayne County Commission seat in 1970, her opponent challenged the legality of Mahaffey using her maiden name on the ballot instead of her husband's last name. Mahaffey won the lawsuit, which went all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court, but not the seat.



Maryann Mahaffey

Age: 81

Born: Jan. 18, 1925, in Burlington, Iowa

Family: Husband of 56 years, Herman (Hy) Dooha; daughter, Susan Dooha

Education: Master's degree in social work, University of Southern California, 1951; bachelor's degree, Cornell College, Iowa, 1946

Professional: Retired as Detroit City Council president on Dec. 31, 2005, after 31 years on the council, including 12 years as president; worked as staff supervisor and group organization director for the Metropolitan Detroit Girl Scouts, and taught at the University of Michigan and Wayne State University in 1952-72.

Civic: Member of the Founders Society, Detroit Institute of Arts; Friends of Belle Isle; Friends of Detroit Public Library; the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Detroit Historical Society

But there was a victory even in that defeat.

"She established that precedent for women," Susan Dooha said. "I remember the campaign being a very difficult time."

Mahaffey was elected to the council in 1973 in the same race that brought Mayor Coleman Young to office. During her 31 years on the council, she tangled repeatedly with Young, and later his successors, Dennis Archer and Kilpatrick, and was known for grilling department heads every time they came to the table.

"We use to call her '20 questions,' " said former Councilman Clyde Cleveland. "She'd always say, 'I have another question.' And when you answered that, she'd say, 'I have another question.' "

Over the years, as she outlasted her contemporaries and became the institutional memory for the council, she always held firm to the belief that the role of the council was to serve as a check and balance to the mayor. Her popularity never waned, even though the causes she fought for began fading into the political background.

Her last council term was difficult, not just because of her illness, but because of bitter divisions between the members.

Council President Kenneth Cockrel Jr. said when he took the helm in January, Mahaffey stressed the importance of the institution they represented.

"She said it was not about individual council members' personalities or individual members, we represent an institution that is bigger than that," he said. Cockrel's father, the late Kenneth Cockrel Sr., served with Mahaffey in the late 1970s.

Mahaffey brought her social work sensibilities to the council. She pushed the city to create and fund a rape crisis unit; she pushed for legislation that regulated homeless shelters and apartment rentals, and she expanded the city's healthcare benefits to include gay couples.

Throughout her long political career, Mahaffey also was a great friend to organized labor.

A defining moment in her support occurred in 1995 when employees of the Free Press and Detroit News went on strike. Mahaffey's backing went farther than most metro Detroit politicians when she was arrested after she and others blocked the entrance to the Detroit News during a sit-in.

"It wasn't just lip service with Maryann," said Lou Mleczo, president of Detroit Newspaper Guild Local 22. "She was at our picket sites. She, on several occasions, intervened with Detroit police to protect our pickets ... when the police were giving us a very hard time on the picket lines."

For the city's largest union, which has lost members through layoffs and attritions, Mahaffey was a godsend.

Jimmy Hearn, an attorney for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 25 in Detroit, called Mahaffey a true representative of the people.

"She set a standard amongst her peers that all council members across the state and country should try to aspire to in terms of her effectiveness," Hearn said.

But she also had an adventurous streak.

In her late 60s, she broke her ankle while dancing with pachyderms at an elephant farm in Thailand. She most famously hammed it up for a newspaper photo in which she posed as a superhero in red and blue tights and a cape. And she also spent several nights on the streets with the city's homeless people to bring attention to their plight.

But one defining moment that would set the course for her activism was when she worked at a Japanese interment camp during World War II.

Her daughter, Dooha, said: "It was such a powerful lesson about injustice and human rights that it was really a touchstone for the rest of her life ... about basic justice for human beings."

In addition to her husband and daughter, Mahaffey is survived by her son-in-law, Robert Fasano; granddaughter Lily, and brother Kent Mahaffey.

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Accomplishments:

- Pushed the Detroit Police Department to create a rape crisis unit, fighting every year to ensure sufficient funding.

- Fought to create the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, a means for the city to distribute federal grants to small neighborhood organizations.

- Fought for increased city regulation of homeless shelters and apartment rentals.

- Led the fight for an ordinance passed by the City Council that requires city contractors to pay workers a living wage.

Public memorial pending

Arrangements were pending Thursday for Maryann Mahaffey, but funeral services will be private.

A public memorial service will be held later.

Donations and contributions can be made to Mahaffey's parish, Central United Methodist Church, 23 E. Adams St., Detroit, 48226.

