



WOMEN WE'VE LOST IN 2007

I began thinking about this article upon hearing of the death of Mississippi's beloved Miss Evelyn Gandy, our first woman Lieutenant Governor, and a person I much respected. By the time I sat down to write, Miss Gandy's peaceful passing had been followed by the violent death of another woman of politics whose career I had followed at a distance, Benazir Bhutto. Ruminating about the deaths of two women generally associated with politics that I have admired from afar reminded me of other women I've admired who left us this year.

Two thousand and seven has come and gone, leaving us bereft of a few women who helped to define women in politics during my lifetime: Miss Gandy, Benazir Bhutto, Molly Ivins, Lady Bird Johnson, and Catherine Roraback. Let's remember these five women that we've lost in 2007 and January 2008. These fundamentally different women have each impacted me personally, society in general, as well as the politics of the nation and the world.

Edythe Evelyn Gandy was a legend in Mississippi before I was even born. The only woman in her class at the University of Mississippi School of Law, she was the first woman editor of the Mississippi Law Journal and the first woman elected president of the law school student body. Leaving law school, she returned to Hattiesburg, Forrest County, Mississippi, where she had been born, reared, and completed her undergraduate education at the University of Southern Mississippi, beginning the practice of law there in 1947. After a successful run for the Mississippi legislature as a Representative from Forrest County in 1948 – becoming the first woman to hold that office in Mississippi's history – Miss Evelyn distinguished herself by being Mississippi's woman of political firsts: first woman to be appointed Mississippi's Assistant Attorney General (1949), first woman to be appointed Commissioner of Public Welfare (1964), first woman to be elected to a state-wide constitutional office in Mississippi (State Treasurer 1960-1964, 1968-1972), first woman to be elected Commissioner of Insurance (1972-1976), and the first woman to be elected Lieutenant Governor (1976-1980). Miss Gandy made one unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor in 1963. She made two unsuccessful bids for the governorship of the state, in 1979 and 1983, losing in a primary runoff for the Democratic nomination on both occasions. Miss Gandy returned to the private practice of law in Hattiesburg in January of 1984 with the firm of Ingram and Associates, now Ingram/Wilkinson, where she maintained an office until her death last week.

I was fortunate enough to get to know Miss Gandy as a result of my involvement with the Mississippi Bar's Women in the Profession Committee, which has hosted the Evelyn Gandy Lecture Series for 14 years. This lecture series, recognized as the premier continuing legal education event for women lawyers in the state, was named for Miss Evelyn – whose record for public service has never been surpassed. The series, which focuses on women lawyers in public service, recognizes that Gandy paved the way for all women in public service today, and spent a lifetime encouraging women to seek to enter public service. Miss Evelyn believed in the lecture series. During the two years that Administrative Judge Deneise Turner Lott and I co-chaired the series, we conferred with her to ensure her approval of the curriculum. She wanted to be assured that the focus of the series never wavered, focusing on

service to citizens of the State of Mississippi, as was the focus of her life. Prior to this involvement in 2004-2005, I had admired her only from afar. I realized then that she was a friend and supporter, which was her response to any woman who reached out to her for guidance. I had the absolute pleasure of serving under her leadership as Honorary Chair of the Mississippi Supreme Court's Gender Fairness Advisory Study Committee. Jennifer Ingram Wilkinson, her law partner and protégé, and I continue to serve as co-chairs of this committee. After 2004 when she would telephone me occasionally, the subject was always me, never her — always the needs of others, always service.

Governor Barbour, commenting on Miss Gandy's passing, said: "Evelyn Gandy was a pathfinder in Mississippi. She broke the glass ceiling for women in politics and government and did it with dignity and calm effectiveness." This is so. But in cracking the glass ceiling, she was not doing so, per se. She was living her passion – the passion of public service. She was quoted in the *Hattiesburg American* in 2002 on women running for public office in Mississippi by reflecting "We're not trying to be better than men, we're just trying to join them." She never tried to be a politico, or a woman politico. She was working for the public good. John Corlew, a Jackson attorney who knew her well, said it best when he said: "There were no ulterior motives. There were no political considerations...She had no interest in doing anything but the utmost for the public good."

Governor Gandy received too many honors to mention here. National accolades for Mississippi's public servants are few; however, one honor that she treasured, and that Mississippi women lawyers and public servants have treasured with her, is the 1997 Margaret Brent Award given to Miss Evelyn by the American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession. The Commission's highest honor, she received the award for paving the way to success for other female lawyers. She served as a member of the National Advisory Council for the Salvation Army and also received an appointment to the U. S. Navy Academy Board of Visitors, bestowed by President Jimmy Carter, further evidence of the national dimension of her career.

Lieutenant Governor Amy Tuck has joined us at Mississippi State this year. Governor Tuck said: "Mississippians have lost a true stateswoman. Lieutenant Governor Gandy was a role model for all women as the first woman elected to statewide office in Mississippi. She served Mississippi with distinction and always remained the hospitable southern lady, full of grace and wisdom. She will always remain in our hearts and be remembered for her loyalty and service to the great State of Mississippi." Amen, Amy!

I had planned to discuss her political legacy in more concrete terms – and she had concrete triumphs greater than simply succeeding as a woman in politics in Mississippi. The truth is that her legacy is more spiritual than concrete. She was a public servant, a daughter of her place and time, yet someone out of time. Women in public service in Mississippi can travel the path that she defined as she distinguished herself, and in so doing, distinguished Mississippi women and her home state.

Oh, that we will honor her as she honored us — by mentoring the young women who will follow us as we followed her into public service. Miss Evelyn's Manuscript Collection is maintained at the McCain Library and Archives of the University of Southern Mississippi.

