



Harriet Keyserling's photo in Facebook

Harriet Keyserling dies

Beaufort's political matriarch, Harriet Keyserling, died Friday evening, December 10. She was 88 and had been in hospital intensive care following knee surgery earlier this month.

Until retiring from elected political office in 1993, Keyserling served as Beaufort's state representative for 16 years, preceded by service in the mid-1970s as Beaufort county council's first female member. A committed liberal Democrat, she continued behind the scenes to be an influential force in local and statewide politics until the end of her life.

She led in promoting better public education, enhanced cultural opportunities, and shut-down of nuclear waste storage in South Carolina. After retirement from elective office in 1993 she chronicled her political life in "Against the Tide: One Woman's Political Struggle", an autobiographical description of her journey as a liberal Yankee in the world of good-old-boy conservative Southerners.

Harriet Keyserling was born 1922 in New York City and was graduated 1943 from Barnard College with an economics degree. She fell in love with a young doctor from the South, Herbert Keyserling, Jewish like herself, and married him in 1944. He moved her from the big city to his tiny country hometown of Beaufort, in which she lived the rest of her life.

Herbert and Harriet Keyserling became mainstays of the Beaufort community with Herbert for decades delivering more babies than any other doctor here. After giving birth to four children—Judy, Billy, Beth and Paul—Harriet threw herself into local cultural affairs, then morphed into an energetic and outspoken local and statewide political force. Her son, Billy Keyserling, currently serves as Beaufort's mayor.

She never forgot her New York City roots and reminded locals often of the sacrifices she made to adjust to small-town Southern ways. To fill the gap in the town's cultural life, she co-founded in the late 1940s Beaufort's Community Concert Series, which brought soprano Marion Anderson, pianist William Kappel and many other world-famous musical artists here. For decades she hosted Saturday-evening dinners at her home overlooking Battery Creek, where sophisticated conversation by Harriet

and her guests was mingled with humorous jokes told by her self-effacing physician husband, who predeceased her.

Both Harriet and Herbert Keyserling were beloved members of the Beaufort community. Having arrived here from New York City as a young bride, kicking and screaming against her preconceptions of the South, she proceeded to inform the community with loving and liberal thought, bringing enlightenment and opportunities of the outside world to the people who populated this island place in the years just after a bridge was built from the mainland. It can truly be said she changed Beaufort more than Beaufort changed her.


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OUR VIEW

Harriet Keyserling's life one of practical achievement

The legislator and first county councilwoman "brought home the bacon" in her own, significant way.

Harriet Keyserling improved her community and state with a broad brush.

Keyserling, who died Friday, helped make things better for women, minorities, students, artists and environmentalists.

Her service as the first woman elected to Beaufort County Council and eight terms as a state representative from Beaufort is inspiring for its breadth.

In public schools, she was instrumental in getting passed the Education Improvement Act of 1984, which introduced academic standards, teacher accountability, student testing, public comparisons of school and district performance, special programs for gifted and talented students and much more.

In the area of environmental protection, she limited the disposal of nuclear waste in South Carolina through the Southeastern Interstate Low-Level Waste Compact. She was a member of Congress' Advisory Panel on Nuclear Waste Disposal.

But boring into the details of the state accommodations tax on overnight lodging might best illustrate her impact on the day-to-day lives of the public. It has resulted in tens of millions of dollars for arts and tourism-related organizations. It has given local governments a way — besides property taxes — to pay for services, such as additional police and fire protection, needed as a result of tourism.

Grants from accommodations tax collections have encouraged civic, recreational and cultural activities that improve our quality of life immeasurably. It has made nonprofit groups more accountable by demanding specific plans for use of the money. And it has given marketers millions of dollars to promote local tourism.

To look at the bed tax is to look

directly into the creative, inquisitive and driven mind and heart of Keyserling.

You might say the story starts in 1980 when she suggested to Gov. Dick Riley that he establish the Governor's Task Force on the Arts. He did, and Keyserling co-chaired it. With no budget or staff, they went about methodically making a strong case for government support of the arts. They showed that it is a pocketbook issue because of its economic impact and that the arts attract industry because good companies want good employees who do not want to live in a cultural wasteland. They showed that the public wants government to support the arts.

Then the task force endorsed and shaped the bed tax bill, which had stalled for seven years before its original author left the legislature.

Keyserling gained key support from Hilton Head Island tourism leaders, led by the late John Curry, along with John David Rose and Angus Cotton. With input from many constituencies, the bill was carefully crafted to promote tourism and the arts. Keyserling was interested in it for the arts. One provision was the establishment of local accommodations tax advisory committees to be the gatekeepers on grant requests, and each committee had to have at least one member representing the arts.

The bill passed in 1984. Imagine Beaufort County and its municipalities today without all these years of bed-tax income.

Keyserling said, "My forte has never been bringing home the bacon for my district." But she hoped this law would somehow even "out that shortcoming, though that was not my target in filing the bill."

Yes, Keyserling overcame that "shortcoming" in spades. The bed tax law has one more gift. It gives a glimpse into a life well lived.

Hers was a life of lasting significance and one for which we are deeply grateful.

NOTABLE QUOTE

"She was known for her analytical nature and very close attention to detail. You knew that whenever she took a stand on an issue, it was based on principle and deep research. She thought big and cared deeply about this state."

S.C. Supreme Court Justice Jean Toal, who served in the legislature with Harriet Keyserling

HONORING AN ICON

First Beaufort County councilwoman was 'pillar of politics'



File • The Island Packet

Then-state Rep. Harriet Keyserling is interviewed by Tom Fowler for S.C. ETV's Capitol View in this file photo.

ISLAND PACKET 12-12-10

By **PATRICK DONOHUE**
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Two years after becoming the first woman ever elected to Beaufort County Council, Harriet Keyserling was approached by her son Billy and others about taking her talents to the Statehouse in Columbia.

She had some reservations about the idea.

Representing Beaufort in the S.C. House of Representatives would give her a chance to make a difference on the issues nearest to her heart — public education reform, environmental protection and promotion of the arts — but there were other factors to consider.

"She was a Jewish New York liberal walking onto the steps of a white, male, Christian institution," Billy Keyserling said. "That's where her reluctance came about."

She ran anyway, and had a 16-year legislative career that was marked by her advocacy of the arts, education and protecting the environment from nuclear waste.

Please see **ICON** on 10A

REMEMBERING KEYSERLING

- **A graveside service** for former Beaufort County Councilwoman and state Rep. Harriet Keyserling will be at 3:30 p.m. Monday at Beth Israel Synagogue Cemetery in Beaufort, according to Keyserling's obituary.

- **Visitation** will be at the Firehouse near the intersection of Craven and Scott streets following the service, the obituary said.

- **Memorials** can be made to the Keyserling Cancer Center at Beaufort Memorial Hospital and Beth Israel Synagogue.

- **Arrangements** by Copeland Funeral Home.

Keyserling's legacy one of triumph in SC politics

Oddly enough, it was a Christmas party that pulled a small Jewish woman from New York City out of her shell in Beaufort, and it turned into a gift for the ages.

Harriet Keyserling was a volunteer "observer" of Beaufort County Council meetings for the League of Women Voters in the early 1970s. Her kids were out of college. She'd just been to Afghanistan and India to visit friends. Her life was ripe for change, when in one of the tedious council meetings, a long discussion evolved on a Christmas party for county employees. Sitting quietly in her seat, Keyserling's mind was roaring. It was her intuition the employ-



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ees would rather have a plump turkey in the oven than a boring party at the county shed.

But it also had been her observation that the schools needed attention, as well as economic development, environmental protection, growth control, day care, energy policy, poverty,

Please see **POLITICS** on 10A

POLITICS

Continued from 1A

nuclear waste disposal, teen pregnancy, and the arts. The possibilities flew around in her mind like the yellow tennis balls she loved to whack, until her knees gave out.

A friend, George McMillan, urged Keyserling to run for Beaufort County Council if she thought she could do better. Thus a shy 50-something began two decades of elected public service, including eight terms in the state House of Representatives. A portrait by her friend Susan Graber now hangs in the Beaufort County Courthouse, a testament to a life that will always stand out in South Carolina history.

It took Keyserling 375 pages to hit the highlights of her public activities in a must-read book for anyone who wants to understand the Lowcountry:

“Against the Tide: One Woman’s Political Struggle.”

The book is one of the legacies of a dear woman who died Friday at age 88.

FOR LOVE

A few years ago, I was asked to give a talk about a book for the “Book Break” program sponsored by the Friends of the Hilton Head Library. I chose “Against the Tide” because Keyserling wrote columns for The Beaufort Gazette editorial page, and her world of ideas and public policy crossed mine. I was thrilled that Keyserling came. Afterward, I showed her the wonderful original works by local artists that grace the library walls. I hoped it was a reward for her support for libraries and the arts. I know she appreciated the ovation the room of islanders gave her.

Keyserling, we all discovered that day, is like many others in our county.

She came from afar, well-educated, well-read, well-traveled, with an appreciation for what’s here, but a drive to make it better.

She arrived in 1944, the shy 22-year-old daughter of a prominent dentist, a year’s experience under her belt as an administrator in a pencil factory. She came for love. She married Dr. Herbert Keyserling of Beaufort, a beloved figure who healed and birthed enough people to tip any election. Both their fathers came to America as children of immigrants escaping religious persecution. Herbert’s brother, Leon, graduated from Harvard Law School and ended up being chairman of President Harry Truman’s Council of Economic Advisers. Only in America.

Besides raising four children in Beaufort, Harriet Keyserling got involved with things like a film series and chamber music. She said she felt odd in the Deep South. But she

never swam against the tide alone. There were Courtney and Elizabeth Siceloff at the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, one of the few integrated places in the state at the time, and Pat Conroy, who she helped as a young man by frantically typing one of his first manuscripts on deadline. And there were many more friends and supporters.

A TRIUMPH

Keyserling hated campaigning. She did not like public speaking. She specialized in ideas, and the strategy to see many of them come to life.

She liked data. She did research. She relished regional and national classes and seminars. She didn’t slap backs with the legislature’s good ole boys who proudly called themselves the Fat and Ugly Caucus in her day.

Keyserling learned the art and power of coalitions, and the value of establishing a foothold for a good cause

with a task force or a commission. She was relentless. The cover photo of her book shows her sitting alone in the House chamber, reading, long after the others had left. She knew her agenda, and she tried to convince, not cajole.

She said this about her tennis opponents, and it could serve as her epitaph: “They knew me as a fair fighter.”

In that talk to the library patrons, I said that Keyserling’s story is one of mankind’s triumph over long odds. I hope that kind of triumph will come this way again because it was a triumph of civil discourse over yelling. It was a triumph for public good in politics over personal gain. It was a triumph of the conscience over convenience. It was a triumph of reason and give-and-take over talking points.

And it was a triumph, too, for the simple beauty of a Jewish mother’s intuition about a Christmas party.

HARRIET KEYSERLING • 1922-2010



Passion lives on

1st county councilwoman laid to rest,
remembered for decades of service

ISLAND PACKET 12-14-10



BOB SOFALY • The Beaufort Gazette
Rabbi Arnold Belzer, right, prepares to begin the graveside service for Harriet Hirschfeld Keyserling on Monday at Beth Israel Cemetery in Beaufort. Keyserling was active in politics for more than 18 years, including eight terms in the S.C. House of Representatives.

KEYSERLING

Continued from 1A

good, strong, decent, smart, cultured woman, teaching the highest ideals of this nation among her last messages on Earth. Remember that the journey is as important as the destination.”

Keyserling, 88, died Friday of kidney failure following knee replacement surgery earlier this month.

Hundreds gathered in Beaufort to remember and say goodbye to the mother of four, grandmother, friend and former Democratic politician.

Several in the crowd dabbed away tears as Marlena Smalls performed a song in remembrance.

The service also included remarks from two of Keyserling's children.

Her son, Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling, said that “though we bury the flesh,” his mother and father, the late Dr. Herbert Keyserling, “live on through what we do the rest of our lives and what we pass on to others.

“So what I ask of all of you is to let these little pieces of Harriet and Herbert affect you in your everyday life,” he said. “Courage, passion to do the right thing, charity, justice, equality.”

Harriet Keyserling was born in New York City in 1922 and moved to Beaufort in 1944, the new bride of Dr. Herbert Keyserling.

A well-educated, shy Jewish girl, she became involved in politics once her children were grown.

She helped start the League of Women Voters and in 1974 was the first woman elected to Beaufort County Council. Two years



BOB SOFALY • The Beaufort Gazette

Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling talks about his mother, former state Rep. Harriet Keyserling, at her graveside service Monday at Beth Israel Cemetery in Beaufort. Harriet Keyserling was buried beside her husband, Herbert, a prominent local doctor who died in 2000.

later, at age 54, she was elected to the state House of Representatives. She served eight terms, championing causes that included public education, conservation, the arts, nuclear waste and women's issues.

After retiring in 1993, she wrote “Against the Tide: One Woman's Political Struggle,” a book about her life and the local and statewide politics and policymaking of her era.

Before her death last week, it was hard to imagine a time when Harriet Keyserling wasn't

prodding, pushing, encouraging, caring, organizing, giving, working, frowning and laughing, Ferillo said.

“She was ours, and we loved her more than any telling of it,” he said.

Along with her public service, Harriet Keyserling was a caring mother who taught her children about empathy and compassion, the importance of a solid handshake, to always look others in the eye when speaking to them and to make sure to display confidence and character,

daughter Beth Kramer said during the service.

Her own journey from a shy woman afraid to talk in front of crowds to a well-respected politician proves that anyone can change — a lesson Kramer said she carries with her today.

She taught her children to have integrity and humility in who they are, Kramer said.

“Mama, I'm not always proud of what I say and do,” Kramer said. “But I hope when it's time for me to go that I am loved and respected as much as you.”