

Florynce R. Kennedy

Activist

1916-2000

by Susan Jezak Ford

Florynce Rae Kennedy relished her controversial reputation. Proudly wearing her trademark cowboy hat and pink sunglasses, she spoke out frankly for the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and all minorities.

Kennedy was born the second of five daughters and grew up on the 2600 block of Garfield Street. Her father, a train porter, reportedly once drove members of the Ku Klux Klan off of his property in a mostly white neighborhood. Kennedy graduated from Lincoln High School. She got an introduction to fighting for civil rights when she organized a boycott against a local Coca-Cola bottler who refused to hire black truck drivers.

Kennedy worked at several jobs in town before moving to New York with her sister in 1942. Ignoring advice to become a teacher, she enrolled in pre-law courses at Columbia University. Her application to Columbia's law school was rejected—supposedly because of her gender—until she threatened to sue the school. She graduated with a Columbia law degree in 1951.

As a lawyer, Kennedy represented Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and H. Rap Brown, but she gradually became unhappy with the racism she saw in the justice system. She turned to political activism, founding the Media Workshop in 1966 to fight racism in journalism and advertising. She organized feminist lawyers to challenge New York's abortion law, which was credited with influencing the Legislature to liberalize abortion the following year. In the 1970s, she joined Gloria Steinem on the lecture circuit, sharing her radical views on feminism and civil rights.

Kennedy's stormy tactics were not always admired. In 1974, *People* magazine described her as "the biggest, loudest and, indisputably, the rudest mouth on the battleground where feminist activists and radical politics join in mostly common cause." Kennedy rarely worried about what other people thought, and she never tolerated self-pity from anyone. She pushed others to take action by proclaiming, "Don't agonize. Organize."



Sources

"Activist Florynce Kennedy, 84, Dies." *The Kansas City Star*, 24 Dec. 2000, B1.

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"Florynce Rae Kennedy." *Biography.com* <http://www.biography.com>.

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