

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Statement on the Death of Former Senator Jean Carnahan

January 31, 2024

Jean Carnahan was a devoted partner, public servant, and the first woman to represent Missouri in the U.S. Senate, and someone I'm proud to have called a dear friend. In the face of unspeakable loss, she found the courage to step up into work she'd never imagined, putting the people and values she believed in above her personal comfort in order to serve our Nation.

I remember when she arrived in Washington, just weeks after losing her husband Mel and their son Randy in a plane crash. I didn't know her then, but I knew her loss. When I met her, moments after she'd been sworn into Mel's seat in the Senate, I told her what other Senators had told me when I'd first arrived, having just lost my own wife and daughter: "Lose yourself in the work." But Jean found herself in the work, and over the years, I saw her turn her pain into tremendous purpose.

Jean always knew the value of hard work. She met the love of her life, Mel, in high school, where they sat together in class. She worked her way through college, the first in her family to graduate, at a time when many women never considered attending. Married at 21, she became Mel's indispensable political partner, in the field, in the Governor's mansion, and over the decades helping to run his nearly two dozen State and local campaigns. Whether working to pass school bonds in their hometown of Rolla or fighting for daycare for working families as Missouri's First Lady, she was sharp, kind, and committed to consensus. She revered history and took the honor of the job seriously, personally raising funds to restore the Governor's mansion as the people's house.

In the U.S. Senate, Jean worked for gun safety and reproductive freedom. She stood up for workers, sponsoring legislation to support folks who'd lost their jobs in the wake of 9/11. And as one of only a handful of women to have then served on the Armed Services Committee, she was part of the first congressional delegation to travel to Afghanistan that year and helped to guide our country through its own immense grief at that time.

When Mel was killed, Jean embraced a new motto: "Don't let the fire go out." She dedicated her life to stoking the flames. And thanks to her quiet courage and lifetime of service, they will keep burning bright.

I'm grateful for Jean's support over the years, and for the support of her brilliant, strong children Russ, Tom, and especially Robin, whom I'm so proud to have serving in my administration as our Administrator of General Services.

Our love is with them today, with her grandchildren, and with the people of Missouri whom she so honorably served in so many ways for so long.

Categories: Statements by the President : Former Sen. Jean Carnahan, death.

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