

Goodbye, old friend

Mahaffey, longtime Detroit council member, dies at age 81



Detroit City Council President Maryann Mahaffey and Jeffrey Montgomery, executive director of the Triangle Foundation, March 3, 2004, during a demonstration for equal marriage rights. Photo: Associated Press

BY DAWN WOLFE GUTTERMAN

DETROIT - The progressive movement lost one of its hardest-working, most determined leaders when former Detroit City Council President Maryann Mahaffey died last week. Whether the cause was labor rights or equal civil rights for LGBTs, Mahaffey "just knew it was the right thing to do."

Mahaffey died early on July 27 at the age of 81.

"She fought against hunger, racism and discrimination of all kinds. She never wavered in her beliefs and principles on behalf of all of us," Mahaffey's family said in a statement. "Maryann Mahaffey was a teacher, mentor, advocate and warrior for justice to the end."

"Maryann Mahaffey was the leader and role model for those of us in Detroit who embrace the 'ethical liberal' label," said Barbara Murray, executive director of AIDS Partnership Michigan. "Her spirit, drive and dreams live on in thousands of us. We are incredibly fortunate she passed our way."

Mahaffey, who was first elected to Detroit City Council in November 1973, was a vocal ally of the city's LGBT community. Mahaffey supported awarding domestic partner benefits to gay and lesbian employees in the city, and in 2001 she grilled Detroit police officers involved in a sting operation that targeted gay men in Rouge Park.

In 2004, Mahaffey came out strongly against the anti-marriage Proposal 2. When reporters were not allowed to follow same-sex couples applying for marriage licenses into City Hall, Mahaffey left the council table and came outside to speak to them.

"As far as I'm concerned, people have a right to formalize their relationships and I think it's much ado about nothing," Mahaffey was quoted as saying about the proposal in an Oct. 6 BTL story. "I've known families who have been together for 53 years and they're gay."

Johnny Jenkins, co-founder and director of the Detroit Black Pride Society, said that he had the pleasure of meeting Mahaffey on several occasions.

Jenkins said he was most impressed by the way Mahaffey "stood up for us on Proposal 2."

"Very few other politicians were willing to stick their necks out on the line to fight against Proposal 2, [but] she did it without hesitation. She just knew that it was the right thing to do, as she did all the time. She didn't have to stop to think about it or take a poll, she just knew it was the right thing to do."

"She was beloved by all of us and she's definitely going to be missed," Jenkins said.

Jenkins wasn't the only LGBT community leader mourning Mahaffey's loss.

"Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are among those who will miss Maryann the most. Since her first campaign in 1974, she never wavered in her support and commitment to advance the rights and protections of GLBT people," said Triangle Foundation Executive Director Jeff Montgomery. "She was always the courageous champion for GLBT issues at the Council table and in the broader community."

"Maryann Mahaffey was not only Detroit's

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most trusted and popular public figure, she was the most trusted, popular and beloved public friend of the GLBT community," Montgomery said.

Grace McClelland, executive director of the Ruth Ellis Center, said that she met Mahaffey for the first and only time at this year's Pride banquet, but "I knew of her reputation as soon as I hit the City of Detroit."

"What can you say about her? She stood up for the citizens of Detroit, particularly those who may not have been able to speak for themselves regarding social justice issues," McClelland said. "She really dedicated her entire life to the folks of Detroit, and we really need to celebrate her life as she transitions."

Mahaffey was first elected to City Council in November 1973. She served as council president pro tem from 1978 to 1982 and 1998 to 2001, and as the council's president from 1990 to 1998 and from 2002 to her retirement. In October, Mahaffey announced her retirement after being diagnosed with T-cell leukemia. The announcement came as Mahaffey was running for her eighth term on the City Council.

"Maryann Mahaffey was an extraordinary public servant," Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick said in a statement sent to BTL. "She was a determined woman, dedicated to improving the quality of life for all Detroit citizens. I am glad we had the opportunity to celebrate Maryann's legacy while she was still with us. She will be missed, but her spirit will live on in the hearts of Detroiters forever."

A native of Burlington, Iowa, Mahaffey earned an undergraduate degree at Cornell College in Iowa, and a masters in social work from the University of Southern California.

Mahaffey died at Henry Ford Hospital, with her husband Herman Dooha, her daughter, Susan Dooha, and her pastor, Edwin Rowe, at her side, hospital spokesperson Synthia Bryant said. A cause of death wasn't immediately available. Her family said a private funeral will be held. A memorial service also will be planned and announced at a later date.

Additional reporting provided by The Associated Press and BTL archives.