

PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

## Gretchen Kafoury's legacy one of action, change

**G**retchen Kafoury passed away of natural causes on Friday, March 13 at the age of 72. Like others, Street Roots was sad to hear the news, and overcome with emotion to not only honor, but to carry on her work.

To say that Oregon lost a great leader seems inadequate. It is difficult to find the words that sufficiently encompass the deep and monumental work to which Gretchen dedicated her life.

From being an outspoken leader for gender equality in the 1960s and '70s to being a lifelong advocate for the poor, women's rights and numerous other social

justice causes — Gretchen walked the walk.

Gretchen co-founded the Oregon chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1970 and the Oregon Women's Political Caucus in 1971. From 1977 to 1982 she served in the Oregon legislature as a state representative — working to support health care, mental health and domestic violence programs, among others.

In 1985 Gretchen was elected to the Multnomah County Commission where she continued her work on homelessness, mental health and health care, including teen health care centers. In 1991, she became a Portland City Commissioner, overseeing housing and community development and the arts until 1998.

However, Gretchen was more than a leader and a public servant. She was rabble rouser, a mother, a grandmother, a teacher, an organizer, a friend to the poor. She represents a Portland and an Oregon that generations of Oregonians will strive to become: a true mentor of social justice. When it came to advocating for affordable housing and people experiencing homelessness, she had this advice for Street Roots: "Don't let anyone ever push you around."

She was an educator, teaching at Portland State University's School of Urban and Public affairs on the issues of homelessness and poverty. She sat on nonprofit boards and was a philanthropist for many causes, including Street Roots.

Even in Gretchen's last days she used her voice to advocate for the poor — asking the city to fulfill its goals of building affordable housing in the North Macadam urban renewal area. Just two weeks before Gretchen passed away she gave the following

testimony at City Hall:

"I'm Gretchen Kafoury; retired, I thought. I'm here today like the Ghost of Christmas Past, and my job is to remind you. I'm Scrooge by the way (laughing), and everybody that has had to work with me, or for me, knows that's the truth."

"The reason I feel like the Christmas past reminder is relevant is that commitments that we made have not been kept. Believe me, I know how hard this is. I still don't think it's enough (housing). Our little group of old timers, or old bats or whatever we call ourselves — we just don't think that this is specific enough. There isn't enough agreement as to what will be developed and when it will be developed, and we want to see more of that specificity. ... I am just begging you to reserve this very critical tool. Like it or not, it is a critical tool that the city has to finance affordable housing. Use it wisely. These are precious resources and you have power to use them wisely."

In some ways, Portland has lost one of its strongest social justice voices in the community. But Gretchen's voice will live on forever in the work of her peers, her family, her students and the people who have dedicated their lives to make the community we live in a better place.

Remembering Gretchen will come in many forms as the months and years pass. What better way to honor her than being able to show bold action for people experiencing poverty and those less fortunate.

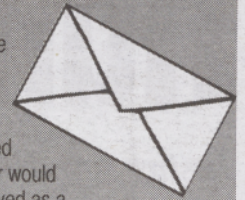
Gretchen would no doubt want us all to collectively carry on her work, but she also would want us to act in a meaningful way to create something of substance for those in need. Possibly that's something like an ongoing Gretchen Kafoury Housing and Homelessness Fund or vowing to never again fall short of the goals we set to build housing for those in need. Gretchen's life was spent giving people experiencing homelessness and poverty a fighting chance. What better way to honor her than by having people have safe places to call home for generations to come.

Whatever we do, collectively, we must raise the bar, to dig a little deeper inside, for each and every one of us to go the extra mile and to make the work we all do count. Gretchen wouldn't want it any other way.

Thank you for the memories, but most of all, thank you for a life well lived and everything you have given us. Onward, Portland.

### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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