

[News](#)

[Obituary](#)



Ethel Kennedy, from the film "Ethel," poses for a portrait during the 2012 Sundance Film Festival Jan. 22, 2012, in Park City, Utah. (AP File/Victoria Will)

Michael Casey

[View Author Profile](#)

Steve LeBlanc

[View Author Profile](#)

Associated Press

[View Author Profile](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

October 10, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Ethel Kennedy, the wife of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, who raised their 11 children after he was assassinated and remained dedicated to social causes and the family's legacy for decades thereafter, died on Thursday, her family said. She was 96.

"It is with our hearts full of love that we announce the passing of our amazing grandmother," Joe Kennedy III posted on X. "She died this morning from complications related to a stroke suffered last week."

"Along with a lifetime's work in social justice and human rights, our mother leaves behind nine children, 34 grandchildren and 24 great-great-grandchildren, along with numerous nieces and nephews, all of whom love her dearly," the family statement said.

President Joe Biden called her "an American icon — a matriarch of optimism and moral courage, an emblem of resilience and service."

"For over 50 years, Ethel traveled, marched, boycotted, and stood up for human rights around the world with her signature iron will and grace," Biden said.

The Kennedy matriarch, mother to Kathleen, Joseph II, Robert Jr., David, Courtney, Michael, Kerry, Christopher, Max, Douglas and Rory, was one of the last remaining members of a family generation that included President John F. Kennedy. Her family said she had recently enjoyed seeing many of her relatives before falling ill.

### Advertisement

A millionaire's daughter who married the future senator and attorney general in 1950, Ethel Kennedy had endured more death by the age of 40, for the whole world to see, than most people would in a lifetime.

She was by Robert F. Kennedy's side when he was fatally shot in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, just after winning California's Democratic presidential primary. Her brother-in-law had been assassinated in Dallas

less than five years earlier.

Her parents were killed in a plane crash in 1955, and her brother died in a 1966 crash. Her son David Kennedy overdosed, son Michael Kennedy died in a skiing accident and nephew John F. Kennedy Jr. in a plane crash. Another nephew, Michael Skakel, was found guilty of murder before the Connecticut Supreme Court ultimately vacated his conviction. And in 2019, her granddaughter Saoirse Kennedy Hill died of an apparent overdose.

"One wonders how much this family must be expected to absorb," family friend Philip Johnson, founder of the Robert F. Kennedy Foundation, told the Boston Herald after Michael Kennedy's death.

Ethel Kennedy sustained herself through faith and devotion to family.

"She was a devout Catholic and a daily communicant, and we are comforted in knowing she is reunited with the love of her life, our father, Robert F. Kennedy; her children David and Michael; her daughter-in-law Mary; her grandchildren Maeve and Saorise and her great-grandchildren Gideon and Josie. Please keep our mother in your hearts and prayers," the family statement said.

Ethel's mother-in-law, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, initially wondered how she would handle so much tragedy.

"I knew how difficult it was going to be for her to raise that big family without the guiding role and influence that Bobby would have provided," Rose recalled in her memoir, *Times to Remember*. "And, of course, she realized this too, fully and keenly. Yet she did not give way."



U.S. Senator-elect Robert F. Kennedy is shown with his wife Ethel boarding plane, Nov. 4, 1964, in New York City at LaGuardia Airport for flight to Glens Falls, N.Y. (AP/File)

Ethel Kennedy founded the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights soon after her husband's death and advocated for causes including gun control and human rights. She rarely spoke about her husband's assassination. When her filmmaker daughter Rory brought it up in the 2012 HBO documentary, "Ethel," she couldn't share her grief.

"When we lost Daddy ..." she began, then teared up and asked that her youngest daughter "talk about something else."

Many of her progeny became well known. Daughter Kathleen became lieutenant governor of Maryland; Joseph represented Massachusetts in Congress; Courtney married Paul Hill, who had been wrongfully convicted of an Irish Republican Army bombing; Kerry became a human rights activist and president of the RFK center; Christopher ran for Illinois governor; Max served as a prosecutor in Philadelphia and Douglas reported for Fox News Channel.

Her son Robert F. Kennedy Jr. also became a national figure — first as an environmental lawyer and more recently as a conspiracy theorist spreading false theories about vaccines. He ran for president as an independent after briefly challenging Biden, and his name remained on ballots in multiple states after he suspended his campaign and endorsed Donald Trump.

Ethel Kennedy did not comment publicly on her son's actions, although several other family members denounced him.

Decades earlier, she seemed to thrive on her in-laws' rising power, enthusiastically backing the 1960 campaign and hosting some of the era's most well-attended parties at their Hickory Hill estate in McLean, Virginia, including one where historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. was pushed fully clothed into the swimming pool. In the Kennedy spirit, she also was a highly competitive tennis player.

"Petite and peppy Ethel, who doesn't look one bit the outdoorsy type, considers outdoor activity so important for the children that she has arranged her busy Cabinet-wife schedule so she can personally take them on two daily outings," The Washington Post reported in 1962.

Accompanying her husband on a round-the-world goodwill tour, she said it was important for Americans to meet ordinary people overseas.

"People have a distinct liking for Americans," she told the Post. "But the Communists have been so vocal, it was a surprise for some Asians to hear America's point of view. It is good for Americans to travel and get our viewpoint across."

She divided her time between homes in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, and Palm Beach, Florida, after Hickory Hill, which they bought from John and Jackie Kennedy in 1957, was sold in 2009 for \$8.25 million.



President Barack Obama awards Ethel Kennedy the Presidential Medal of Freedom Nov. 24, 2014, during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington. (AP File/Jacquelyn Martin)

Born Ethel Skakel on April 11, 1928, she grew up in a 31-room English country manor house in Greenwich, Connecticut, as the sixth of seven children of coal magnate George and Ann Brannack Skakel. She met Robert Kennedy through his sister Jean, her roommate at Manhattanville College.

The newlyweds moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, where he finished his last year of law school at the University of Virginia, and helped expand her world view by introducing her to people like Ralph Bunche, the first person of color to win the Nobel Peace Prize. They decided the safest place for him to stay during his visit was in their home.

"He was so charming and non-complaining, but they did throw things at our house all night long. It was so unthinkable and outrageous, but you got a little taste of what Black people in our country had to go through at that time," she said in the



documentary.

Robert Kennedy became chief counsel to the Senate Select Committee in 1957, and then was appointed attorney general by his brother in 1960.

She supported his successful 1964 campaign for the U.S. Senate in New York and his subsequent presidential bid. Pregnant with their 11th child when he was gunned down by Sirhan Sirhan, her look of shock and horror was captured in images that remained indelible decades later.

The assassination traumatized the family, especially son David Kennedy, just 12 years old when he watched the news in a hotel room. He never recovered, struggling with addiction for years before overdosing in 1984.

In 2021, she said Sirhan should not be released from prison, a view not shared by some others in her family. Two years later, a California panel denied him parole.

Although Ethel Kennedy was linked to several men after her husband's death, most notably the singer Andy Williams, she never remarried.

On the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., she visited Indianapolis, where a monument commemorates the speech her husband gave that night in 1968, credited with averting rioting in the city.

"Of all the Kennedy women, she was the one I would end up admiring the most," Harry Belafonte would write of her. "She wasn't playacting. She looked at you and immediately got what you were about. Often in the coming years, when Bobby was balking at something we wanted him to do for the movement, I'd take my case to Ethel. 'We have to talk to him,' she'd say, and she would."

In 2008, she joined brother-in-law Ted Kennedy and niece Caroline Kennedy in endorsing Sen. Barack Obama for president, likening him to her late husband. She later went to the Obama White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom and meet Pope Francis. Obama called her "a dear friend with a passion for justice, an irrepressible spirit, and a great sense of humor."

"She touched the lives of countless people around the world with her generosity and grace, and was an emblem of enduring faith and hope, even in the face of unimaginable grief," Obama said on social media, one of many high-profile eulogies.

Obama and former President Bill Clinton held her hands as they climbed stairs to lay a wreath at President Kennedy's grave site on the 50th anniversary of his death. Clinton remembered her on Thursday as a "fierce fighter for justice and equality" who built "one of the most effective human rights organizations in the world."

The center she founded still advances human rights through litigation, advocacy, education and inspiration, giving annual awards to journalists, authors and others who have made significant contributions to human rights.

She also was active in the Coalition of Gun Control, Special Olympics, and the Earth Conservation Corps. And she showed up in person, participating in a 2016 demonstration in support of higher pay for farmworkers in Florida and a 2018 hunger strike against the Trump administration's immigration policies.

"She could be found anywhere human dignity was at stake, from picket lines to prisons, on every corner of the map," Clinton said. "She was fearless and indefatigable, a true force of nature, guided by the teachings of her faith that call upon all of us to serve others."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct. 25-Nov. 7, 2024** print issue under the headline: Ethel Kennedy, social activist and wife of Robert F. Kennedy, had died.