



Costanza, Midge (1932-2010)

by Linda Rapp

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Political activist Midge Costanza had a long and distinguished record as a champion of gay and women's rights. Known for forthright speaking and acerbic wit, she occasionally generated controversy, but even those who disagreed with her acknowledged her firm commitment to her convictions.

Constanza's parents, Philip and Concetta Granata Constanza, emigrated from Sicily to upstate New York, where they went into the sausage-making business. Margaret Costanza, who was nicknamed Midge, was born on November 28, 1932 in LeRoy, New York and grew up in Rochester.

After graduating from high school and holding various clerical jobs she became the administrative assistant to a Rochester real estate developer. Through this job she became involved in many community organizations.

Costanza also took an interest in local politics. Beginning as a volunteer on W. Averell Harriman's campaign for governor in 1954, she rose through the ranks of the Democratic Party, becoming the county executive director of Robert F. Kennedy's Senate campaign in 1964 and a member of the Democratic National Committee from 1972 to 1977.

In 1973 Constanza ran for an at-large seat on the Rochester city council and received the largest number of votes in the election, becoming the council's first woman member. Although it was traditional for the leading vote-getter to be named mayor, the council selected a man and named Costanza to the mainly ceremonial post of vice-mayor.

Costanza ran for the United State House of Representatives in 1974, but failed to unseat the Republican incumbent. During the campaign, however, she was surprised to receive a telephone call from the then little-known governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, who was impressed by her record and offered his help.

Costanza returned the favor in 1976 when Carter ran for president. She was co-chair of his New York campaign operation and gave one of the seconding speeches for him at the Democratic National Convention.

When Carter moved into the Oval Office, Costanza, named presidential assistant for public liaison, moved into the office next door. Called "the President's window to the nation," Costanza consulted with a wide array of groups. Among the first was a delegation of gay and lesbian leaders.

Jean O'Leary, the co-executive director of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF, now known as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), who had worked with Costanza and Virginia Apuzzo in an unsuccessful effort to insert a gay rights plank into the 1976 Democratic party platform, requested a meeting to discuss issues of importance to the gay and lesbian community. Costanza was happy to comply, and in March 1977 she welcomed fourteen gay rights advocates, including O'Leary, Bruce Voeller, Frank Kameny, Charlotte Bunch, and the Reverend Troy Perry, to the White House.

The timing of the meeting was somewhat controversial since Anita Bryant's homophobic "Save Our Children" campaign was in full swing. Never one to shrink from controversy, however, Costanza not only proceeded with the historic meeting but also went on to arrange discussions between NGTF co-directors O'Leary and Voeller and senior administration officials.

Her forthright manner and occasionally biting humor brought Costanza, who once described herself as "a loud-mouthed, pushy little broad," the admiration of some, but they rankled others.

After various incidents, including her public disagreements with some of the president's policies, Costanza's role in the White House diminished. While affirming her support for Carter, she resigned from his administration in August 1978.

Costanza moved to Los Angeles in 1979 to become executive director of her friend Shirley MacLaine's "Higher Self" seminars. Six years later she became a vice-president at Alan Landsburg Productions, where she made commercial films and advertisements. All the while she was also a board member for various service groups, such as the AIDS research organization Search Alliance and the National Gay Rights Advocates.

Costanza relocated to San Diego County in 1990. In addition to her continued board work and involvement in local political issues, she coached political candidates in public speaking, and served as the coordinator for Barbara Boxer's winning campaign for the United States Senate in 1992 and as the manager of Kathleen Brown's unsuccessful bid for governor in 1994.

In 2001 California Governor Gray Davis called on Costanza to be his liaison for women's groups and issues. She remained in that job until the end of Davis's administration in November 2003.

Constanza began the next year with a new enterprise, teaching a course on the presidency at San Diego State University.

She also worked with the Political Science and Women's Studies departments of San Diego State and the Political Science department of the University of California, San Diego to develop the Midge Costanza Institute for the Study of Politics and Public Policy. The Institute includes a web site through which her extensive archive of documents are made easily available to scholars.

Costanza hoped that the Institute, besides offering insights into American history and current political and social issues, would inspire young people to become actively involved in politics and social causes.

After a long battle with cancer, Costanza died on March 23, 2010.

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