

Mildred Jeffrey, 93, Activist for Women, Labor and Liberties

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE APRIL 5, 2004

Mildred Jeffrey, who for seven decades was an influential behind-the-scenes combatant in the women's, labor and civil rights movements, died on March 24 in Detroit. She was 93.

Her death was announced by the United Automobile Workers union, where she was the first woman to head a department, becoming director of its Women's Bureau in 1944. She was a founder of the National Women's Political Caucus and was the unofficial head of a group of women who helped persuade Walter F. Mondale to name Geraldine A. Ferraro as his running mate on the 1984 Democratic ticket.

As a student at the University of Minnesota in the early 1930's, she and an African-American classmate helped integrate restaurants in Minneapolis. Decades later, she marched in the South with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.

Mildred McWilliams, known as Millie, was born on Dec. 29, 1910, in Alton, Iowa, the eldest of seven children. Her grandmother, a widow, ran a farm and raised 16 children by herself. Her mother, who was the first woman to become a registered pharmacist in Iowa, in 1908, raised seven children on her own after her husband left the family.

In 1932, Ms. Jeffrey received a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Minnesota, where she immersed herself in the socialist and progressive movements. In 1934, she received a master's degree in social economy and social research from Bryn Mawr.

With the passage of laws promoting labor unions, she became an organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in Philadelphia and later the education director of the Pennsylvania Joint Board of Shirt Workers.

In 1936, she married another Amalgamated organizer, Homer Newman Jeffrey. They organized workers in the South and the East, taking mill jobs and rushing to unionize factories before management fired them for their activism. They divorced in the late 1950's.

During World War II, they moved to Washington and became consultants to the War Labor Board. There, they became close to Walter and Victor Reuther, the U.A.W. leaders.

In 1944, she moved to Detroit when the Reuthers offered her the job as head of the union's new Women's Bureau. She organized the U.A.W.'s first women's conference when a flood of returning veterans resulted in the large-scale postwar layoffs of women from factory jobs.

From 1949 to 1954 she ran the union's radio station. She also became director of its community relations department, aligning the union behind many civil rights efforts, and from 1968 to 1976, the year she retired, she headed the union's consumer affairs department.

Throughout her years at the union, she was active organizing, canvassing and raising money for the Democratic Party and civil rights efforts.

After helping create the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971, she became a leader on the Democratic Party committee that ensured that half the delegates to its 1980 convention were women. She helped propel the careers of many women in politics, including the governor of Michigan, Jennifer M. Granholm, a Democrat.

Patricia Schroeder, a former United States representative from Colorado, said, "Millie is the political godmother for many of us."

Ms. Jeffrey ran for only one office, when she was elected in Michigan to the board of governors of Wayne State University in Detroit. She served on the board for 16 years, including three years as its chairwoman.

She played a major role in many groups, including the Coalition of Labor Union Women, Emily's List, Americans for Democratic Action, the National Abortion Rights League and the American Civil Liberties Union.

She is survived by a daughter, Sharon Lehrer of San Rafael, Calif.; a son, Balfour, of Missoula, Mont.; three sisters, Arlene Swain of St. Paul, Dorothy Shabel of St. Louis and Marjorie Lopic of Seattle; and two grandchildren.

Three years ago, Ms. Jeffrey told a University of Minnesota magazine: "My underlying goal was always to empower women. Get them to learn their rights, and to exercise them!"