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JULIA CARSON | 1938-2007

# 'A warrior for the city'

## CONGRESSWOMAN, 69, GAVE VOICE TO DISADVANTAGED

**SHE NEVER FORGOT:** Compassion for those in need grew out of her childhood experiences

By Rob Schneider  
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U.S. Rep. Julia Carson never forgot what it was like to go to the poor-relief office to ask for food as a child when her mother was sick.

Carson spent a lifetime speaking up for those who couldn't speak for themselves: the poor, the homeless, the victims of discrimination.

"A lot of people get elected to positions and forget that they serve all the people," said John M. Thomas, former president of Community Action of Greater Indianapolis. "She never forgot

that."

"Her weapons of choice are blunt talk and a dollop of charm," the Congressional Quarterly's Politics in America once said of her.

A steadfast Democrat, Carson opposed President Bush's request for authority to wage war in 2002 and, in 1999, won enactment of a measure awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to civil rights figure Rosa Parks.

But to her constituents, she was just Julia.

The congresswoman — one of

See Compassion, Page A19



ROBERT SCHEER / The Star 2002 file photo

**POLITICAL FORCE:** Rep. Julia Carson was the first black and first woman to represent Indianapolis in Congress. She died Saturday.

**FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES MOURN:** Her wit, modesty and accomplishments earn praise

By Mary Beth Schneider  
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U.S. Rep. Julia Carson was mourned Saturday as a one-of-a-kind political force and warm-hearted public servant by people of all kinds — from the most powerful to the least.

Carson died Saturday morning at her Indianapolis home with family by her side. She was 69.

Her death comes three weeks after Carson, the first black and first woman to represent Indianapolis in Congress, announced that the lung cancer she thought she had beaten had returned "with a terminal vengeance."

Two days later, Carson said she would not seek re-election to a seventh term in Congress, though she still held out hope that she would return to Washington to continue representing the city.

She never did.

Services for Carson are tentatively planned for Saturday, with her body expected to lie in state in the Statehouse Rotunda on Friday, though final details haven't been set.

Among those who mourned her passing was Byron Alston, a

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**Race for seat won't be quiet**

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**Share tributes; see photos, more**

IndyStar.com/Carson

# JULIA CARSON 1938-2007



## CONTEST FOR 7TH DISTRICT

### Expert: Race for seat may divide Dems

By Brendan O'Shaughnessy  
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At least a half-dozen potential candidates, Democrats and Republicans, have been laying the groundwork and gauging their chances to fill the seat now left vacant by Rep. Julia Carson's death.

It won't be a quiet race.

Brian Vargus, a political science professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, said there could be a fight because some in the black community see the seat as their own even though the district is not majority black.

A few Republicans have eyed the field, including state Rep. Jon Elrod, R-Indianapolis.

The district, which Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry won with 58 percent of the vote in 2004, is a tough one for Republicans. But GOP analysts at the national level consider the seat worth watching after Republican Greg Ballard's upset of Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, a Democrat.

The Democratic field starts with Carson's grandson, Andre Carson, who hasn't said he would run but who nonetheless received a vow of support from former U.S. Rep. Andy Jacobs. It was Jacobs who helped Julia Carson win his old seat in 1996.

Andre Carson, who was elected to his first term on the City-County Council on Nov. 6, has said he is focused on representing his district rather than on the future.

The first Democrat to officially enter the race was Marion County Treasurer Michael Redman. Elected in 2004 after a career in banking, Redman said he was concerned about being out front with his announcement Nov. 16 but has received positive feedback.

Vargus said other Democrats interested in the spot include Center Township Trustee Carl Drummer, state Reps. Carolee Mays and Gregory W. Porter, former state party Chairman Robin Winston and former state Health Commissioner Woody Myers.

Others mentioned, Vargus said, were Ben County Council Vice President Joanne Sanders, state Rep. David Orentlicher, Mayor Bart Peterson and Sheriff Frank Anderson.

Vargus said the potential for a fight could depend on whom the parties choose.

"Democrats are going to have to show they can nominate someone acceptable to both elite and street Democrats," Vargus said.

Republicans would face a similar challenge with Elrod and another candidate, probation officer Wayne Harmon. It's unclear whether businessman Eric Dickerson, who challenged Carson in 2006, plans to run again.

\* Call Star reporter Brendan O'Shaughnessy at (317) 444-2751.

## VOTERS WILL CHOOSE SUCCESSOR

A special election will be held to fill Julia Carson's seat in the U.S. House, and Gov. Mitch Daniels will pick the date.

Whoever is elected would serve out the remainder of Carson's term, which ends in January 2009, but would have to win the 2008 general election, as well, to keep the seat.

The U.S. Constitution gives governors the power to call special elections to fill vacancies in Congress. But Indiana law prohibits the governor from appointing someone to fill the vacancy; that will be up to voters.

Picking that election date can be tricky, however. The governor must give the political parties time to identify and nominate their candidates. The governor also must give voters adequate time to register and allow time for ballot printing and possible petitions from independent candidates.

The process is expected to take at least 60 days.

## THE SECRET OF HER SUCCESS



**VICTORIOUS:** "We won the U.S. House of Representatives," Rep. Julia Carson told a jubilant crowd at the Democratic Party celebration at the Indianapolis Downtown Marriott on Nov. 7, 2006.

# Carson formed deep bond with supporters

Nothing better defined the bond between the late Congresswoman Julia Carson and her supporters than the campaign signs so many of her constituents planted in their front lawns every election season.

"(I love) Julia," the signs read, that love symbolized by the simple red drawing of a heart.

It was the kind of sappy emotion you would expect to find in a Valentine's Day card, not on a campaign yard sign in the heat of a rough-and-tumble congressional election.

But the signs, it seemed, were everywhere. Think about what they meant: They were a reminder that Carson's supporters didn't just vote for her.

They felt proud when they did so, as many saw Carson's unlikely career and rise from poverty as a message of hope.

Those supporters didn't just back Carson. They defended her with fierce loyalty.

They didn't just see Carson as their elected representative in Congress. They spoke of her as if she were a family member.

In this hard-boiled world of politics, the bond between Carson and her many supporters was stronger than anything else most of us who document politics for a living have ever seen.

Any commentator fool enough to criticize Carson in print was destined to spend hours fielding calls from angry, passionate and, most of all, loyal Carson supporters.

Believe me, I know. So what was it about Carson? How was she able to build such loyalty and, thanks to it, turn a long series of political opponents into nothing more than footnotes in the story of her political career?

The easy, misguided answer you hear so often is that she was queen of an old-style political machine.

It sounds good. But if that were the case, every prominent officeholder would enjoy the type of power Carson held in Marion County.

Every member of Congress would be able to



MATTHEW TULLY

persuade hundreds, if not thousands, of voters to declare their love for them on their front lawns.

In reality, the secret to Carson's success was that she bonded with people by reaching out to them and coming across as one of them.

With tears and hugs, she reached out to senior citizens, mothers of men and women serving in Iraq, crime victims and those struggling to pay the rent.

She sent cards and routinely showed up at funerals and hospitals and front doors. She worked to find work for young men who were coming out of prison. She helped crime victims who were seeking justice.

Indiana Democratic Party Chairman Dan Parker said it well in a statement Saturday, shortly after Carson's death at the age of 69 was announced.

"Julia fought for those with no voice," Parker said. "She fought for those who had lost hope in the system. She fought for and never lost sight of what she believed in."

She also knew how to play the role of politician. Republicans will tell you they walked around nervously at election time because they didn't want to be seen as picking on Carson.

Attacking the congresswoman would result in her using that to get her supporters to the polls.

Carson was known for her wit and until the past year or two could send any audience into laughter. But politicians don't build the type of bond Carson had with her supporters by making them laugh.

Achieving that type of bond takes much more.

The daughter of a poor teenage mother herself, the subject of a life story as uplifting as any you'll find, Carson never stopped understanding what it was like to face long odds.

That is why so many of her constituents were willing to declare their love for her on their front lawns.

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## A WOMAN OF THE PEOPLE

### Lawmaker stayed close to her roots

By Will Higgins  
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Several years ago, when she turned 70, Norma Harris threw a party. On the guest list was Julia Carson, the congresswoman.

The two had known each other as kids. Carson couldn't make the party but sent along a note so sweet, so personal that Harris was overcome.

"It just meant so much," she said. "I really hadn't seen her much, but she said things in that letter that showed she really remembered me. She was everyday people. She was just herself."

Stories like that are legion and go far in explaining Carson's enduring popularity.

Carson was on a first-name basis with everyone. Richard Lugar is "Lugar," Baron Hill is "Baron Hill," but Julia Carson was simply "Julia."

Although she obviously didn't know most of her constituents, when she was out and about, she'd stop, give people a moment and look them in the eye.

Said former pollster Brian Vargus, who teaches political science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis: "She'd walk up to somebody — I've seen this at the polls — and even if she didn't know them she would stop and they responded as if they knew her. And this was not just political savvy; it was, for want of a better term, 'street smarts.'"

Carson grew up modestly and never strayed from her roots. She could have moved to a better neighborhood but never did. She stayed in her house at 25th Street and Park Avenue. She could have arranged to have her phone number unlisted but never did. She was still in the book.

Carson was clever, too. In 2002, a voting machine malfunctioned while she attempted to use it. The machine was easily repaired, but not before she made a scene with television cameras present.

"She played that like a drum," Vargus recalled. "They're keeping Julia from voting!" It was on all the news stations, first thing in the morning. And this may have galvanized her troops.

In that case, she won easily, though the polls had showed a dead heat.

Her district was a longtime Democratic stronghold, but she was seen as vulnerable — and was underestimated because of her unconventional style. She favored big hats and slang. She called people "baby."

"That's my sister," she'd say, referring to a respected neighbor and if the person was a beloved older woman: "She's my mom."

Rivals frequently tried to play up Carson's health problems. When she went to Washington in 1997, double-bypass surgery caused her to miss her swearing-in ceremony. Throughout her career, she frequently was absent from the House floor. In 2004, she missed nearly a third of roll call votes.

Carson kept ticking, though, and she could play rough. Last year, she alerted The Indianapolis Star to a 15-year-old police report that indicated her Republican opponent, Eric Dickerson, had beaten his wife. Dickerson was never prosecuted, but the case, though long closed, drew wide attention.

Politically, Carson was more liberal than most Hoosiers and wasn't afraid to stand out. She was one of the few politicians who spoke out against the Iraq invasion and voted against the war.

"There are 20 million people in Iraq not named Hussein," she said as the bombing commenced. "An invasion would kill untold thousands of those already weakened people."

Carson played on a grand stage, but her genius was in the attention she showered on the folks back home.

Norma Harris, a receptionist at Craig Funeral Home, noted that not a single death was unmarked by Carson, or at least by her office.

Before each funeral, a Carson staffer would hand-deliver a two-paragraph note to be given to the family from the congresswoman.

"They were letters of condolence," Harris said, "and in each one, it seemed like she knew the person. Someone would read the notes at the funeral service. I know it made the families feel good."

\* Call Star reporter Will Higgins at (317) 444-6043.

## Mourn

◆ Carson's welfare reforms, other accomplishments remembered.

From A1

44-year-old convicted felon who credits Carson with turning his life around.

She had kept her door open to him and his brothers when they were children, and she didn't turn her back on him when he was arrested for robbery, kidnapping and confinement. He now runs a Northeastside community center, called Sava the Youth.

"She kept me on track. She encouraged me. She truly was a warrior, a warrior for the city. She never gave up. Never," said Alston, who has been out of prison for 11 years after more than 16 years behind bars.

Former U.S. Rep. Andy Jacobs, the Indianapolis Democrat who helped give Carson her start in politics when she worked for him, and who endorsed her to succeed him when he retired in 1996, became emotional as he talked about his friend.

"I loved her, and she loved me," Jacobs said, his voice cracking. "She was my sister."

About a week ago, Jacobs said, "when she still recognized me, she started silently signaling with her right hand, waving it toward her. I bent down — closer, closer, closer — till I was next to her face. And for the first time ever, she

reached up and kissed me warmly on the cheek. I knew exactly what she meant. She was kissing me goodbye."

Now, he said, people will stop to realize the contributions she has made, that she never boasted about before, in what he called "a really prodigious career of that huge brain in that cranium."

"She was a pretty modest person," he said. "She didn't say much about her enormous accomplishments."

Among those accomplishments, he said, were welfare reforms as Center Township trustee, before she succeeded him in Congress.

"Her welfare reforms did not break one child's heart," he said.

Instead, he said, she teamed up with former U.S. Attorney Virginia Dill McCarty, and "when she found a welfare cheat, she didn't just take them off the rolls. She sued them to get money back for the taxpayer."

Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson, who went to Carson's Near-Northside home to be with her family after learning of her death, said he had his last "meaningful conversation" with Carson about two weeks ago.

"She looked beautiful. It's hard to say she was her old self, given that she was clearly struggling. But she had that wit, that insightfulness, that personality that she was so famous for," Peterson said. "That's how I want to remember her. I thought at the time that it might be the last time that I saw all of that. It turned out that, in fact, it was."

Peterson said his first met Carson



ADRIANE JAECKLE / The Star 2005 file photo

**PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT:** U.S. Rep. Julia Carson "was revered as a champion for building strong and safe communities, working to end homelessness, improving financial literacy for all Americans, and helping her constituents achieve and maintain the dream of home ownership," President Bush, seen with Carson after he spoke at the 2005 Black Expo Summer Celebration, said in a statement Saturday,

when he was a young attorney working the polls in the 1980s. After greeting the polls at the precinct, he said, she told him: "Peterson, you're coming with me."

He spent the next couple of hours riding around with her as she drove to every polling place, chatting personally with people at every stop.

"It was my first introduction to true rural politics and her, and it was truly something I'll never forget," he said.

Republican Gov. Mitch Daniels said Indiana had lost "a true original" who was "honest and brave and a lioness in causes she believed in."

And, Daniels added, "she was such fun. It was rare to leave her presence without a smile. And after the sadness fades a bit, we'll still have that. I know I'll think of her often, and always with a smile."

Amos Brown, the WTLC talk-show host and Indianapolis Recorder columnist, was the last journalist to have a public interview with Carson, on Nov. 5 in her room at Methodist Hospital.

She was reclining in bed, an intravenous tube in her arm. But, he said, he knew her wit was intact when he told her he'd had a dream about her the night before and that she'd looked like actress Halle Berry.

"She replied, 'Can you have that dream again?'" Brown said with a laugh.

## Health issues

Carson's health had been an issue almost from the day she was first elected to Congress.

In January 1997, she took her oath of office at Methodist Hospital, where she was recovering from a double-bypass surgery.

The surgery kept her at home during the early days of the 105th Congress, and she missed 41 of the 640 floor votes that year.

After announcing her sixth term last year, she proclaimed, "People thought I was

too sick to run. I'm not too sick for anything."

This year, though, she was forced to take a medical leave from Congress in September after complaining of leg pain and fatigue.

Her death leaves a vacancy that must be filled by a special election.

Ann DeLaney, one of the nine candidates who ran for the Democratic nomination to succeed Jacobs in 1996 and lost to Carson, expects at least as many people to be interested this time.

"Oh, it will be a real donnybrook," DeLaney said.

Numerous names have been mentioned, including Andre Carson, Carson's grandson and a member of the City-County Council. He already has been endorsed by Jacobs.

Although Peterson has not had his eye on a Washington career, she said, he might be prevailed upon for the good of the Democratic Party.

Two Republicans earlier announced their plans to run for the seat: state Rep. Jon Elrod and probation officer Wayne Harmon.

\* Call Star reporter Mary Beth Schneider at (317) 444-2772.

# JULIA CARSON 1938-2007



FRANK ESPICH / The Star 2000 file photo

**WHITE HOUSE SUPPORT:** President Bill Clinton attended a campaign rally for U.S. Rep. Julia Carson, D-Ind., at the Indiana State Fairgrounds on Oct. 21, 2000. Carson went on to win election to her third term.

## CARSON THROUGH THE YEARS

From the U.S. Capitol to the Statehouse and back, she was involved in politics more than half her life

- **July 8, 1938:** Born in Louisville, Ky.
- **1955:** Graduates from Attucks High School.
- **1965-73:** Works as a legislative assistant for U.S. Rep. Andy Jacobs.
- **1972:** Wins election to the Indiana House of Representatives; is re-elected in 1974.
- **1972-82:** Works as manager, public affairs, for Cummins Engine Co.
- **January 1975:** Indianapolis Star readers select her as Indianapolis Woman of the Year.
- **1976:** Wins election to the Indiana Senate, where she serves until 1990, when she is elected Center Township trustee.
- **October 1985:** Opens a fashion boutique, J. Carson, in Claypool Court.
- **October 1987:** Is sued for failing to pay rent on her Claypool Court store.
- **1990:** Legislative wages are garnished to pay more than \$15,000 in debts associated with the clothing store.
- **1991-96:** Serves as Center Township trustee, during which time she is credited with slash-



WILLIAM OATES / The Star 1973 file photo  
**KEEPING IN TOUCH:** Carson answered mail from her constituents during her first term in the Indiana House in March 1973.

- ing \$9.3 million from the poor relief budget and trimming nearly 85,000 people from the welfare rolls through a "workfare" program.
- **January 1992:** Receives The Indianapolis Star Woman of the Year award.
- **November 1996:** Is elected to her first term in the U.S. House of Representatives.
- **January 1997:** Undergoes double-bypass surgery and misses her swearing-in ceremony in Washington, receiving



JIM YOUNG / The Star 1990 file photo  
**VICTORY:** Carson displayed a tally sheet showing she had won the Democratic nomination for Center Township trustee on May 8, 1990.

- the oath instead in her room at Methodist Hospital.
- **November 1997:** The Center Township government center is renamed the Julia M. Carson Government Center.
- **April 1999:** Congress passes Carson's first successful bill, honoring civil rights figure Rosa Parks with a Congressional Gold Medal.
- **December 1999:** Is treated at



GUY REYNOLDS / The Star 1996 file photo  
**CAMPAIGN STOP:** Muhammad Ali made an appearance for Carson on Oct. 31, 1996, during her first race for Congress.

- \$50,000 federal grant to help repair Veterans Memorial Plaza.
- **October 2002:** Storms out of a debate with Republican challenger Brose McVey, whom she accused of negative campaigning.
- **June 2003:** Legislation authored by Carson, calling for renaming the Federal Courts Building in Indianapolis for former U.S. Sen. Birch Bayh, D-Ind., is passed.
- **June 2003:** Misses numerous votes while taking a leave of ab-

- sence for medical tests.
- **June-Sept 2004:** Misses about 40 percent of votes in the House because of various health problems.
- **October 2004:** Is hospitalized after complaining of feeling tired and ill.
- **October 2006:** Is inducted into the Indianapolis Public Schools Hall of Fame.
- **November 2006:** Is elected to her sixth term in the House.
- **August 2007:** Makes it clear she intends to run for re-election in 2008.
- **September:** Is treated for a leg infection at Methodist Hospital and takes a leave of absence from the House. Misses 16 percent, or 157, of the 960 votes cast in the House from January through Oct. 10.
- **Nov. 5:** Gives her first public interview, to radio talk show host Amos Brown, since being hospitalized Sept. 21, expressing frustration about being absent from Congress and sidestepping questions about running in 2008.
- **Nov. 25:** Announces she has terminal lung cancer. Two days later, she tells supporters she won't seek a seventh term.

## Compassion

- ♦ Political mentor Jacobs encouraged Carson to run for office 35 years ago.

**From A1**  
only 25 black women who have served in Congress, one in the Senate and 24 in the House — was the daughter of an unwed teenage mother who made her living in Indianapolis cleaning houses for the rich. Her mother's life was one from which she drew strength in later years.

"I never thought I would even be a state senator or working for Congress," Carson said in an interview in 1996.

When she did start her political career, Carson had a fear much greater than losing. As a child, she had a stutter so bad that she couldn't say her own name, and she worried that it would resurface.

Often she would deliberately arrive late at campaign appearances to avoid being seen with opponents whom she considered to be better-spoken.

But people who underestimated her did so at their own peril. She never lost an election.

"I told somebody, she may be an African-American woman, but she reminds me of a redneck county judge when she works the room," President Bill Clinton once said.

"She kind of slides into these rooms in Washington, and all these self-important people are there in their expensive suits, using these big words. And then Julia sort of slides out, and she's got whatever it is she came in for, and she's got what don't know what happened."

Carson was first elected to the Indiana

House of Representatives in 1972 and after two terms was elected to the Indiana Senate, where she served until 1990. She then served as Center Township trustee, a post she held until she was elected to Congress in 1996.

### A firm foundation

Born in Louisville, Ky., Carson was a year old when she moved to Indianapolis with her mother, Velma Porter. She credited her mother with giving her the foundation to succeed. No person, Carson said, was ever closer to her or taught her more.

"I wasn't born on Easy Street," Carson said in an interview in 2002. "But my mother was always willing to share."

She never forgot how hard her mother worked for little pay. When she was elected to the Indiana House, her first bill was to bring domestic workers under the minimum wage.

Another experience as a child also shaped her attitudes toward the poor and disadvantaged.

When she was 12, Carson had to go to the Wayne Township trustee's office to get food. "They looked at me something awful. I had tears in my eyes. I said, 'I need some food for my mom. She's very ill and can't work.' They gave me lard and cornmeal and told me not to bring 'my ass' there anymore."

Carson graduated from Attucks High School in 1955, married and had children. The marriage did not last, and she raised her two children as a single working mother.

Carson credited her one-time boss, former U.S. Rep. Andy Jacobs, with getting her involved in politics.

Jacobs had just been elected to Congress in 1964 when he plucked her from her secretarial job with the United Auto Workers to go with him to his Washing-



MPOZI MSHALE TOLBERT / The Star 1999 file photo  
**WARM WELCOME:** Poll worker Verlie Harper (right) greets U.S. Rep. Julia Carson on the Near Northside. Carson was touring polling sites Nov. 2, 1999, in support of Democrat Bart Peterson, who won election that day to his first term as Indianapolis mayor.

ton office.

"We just had a rapport. I liked what she had to say, particularly the way she said it. And I said, 'Boy, there's an awful lot of brains in that large head,'" Jacobs recalled.

But Carson and her children didn't like being away from Indianapolis, so she talked Jacobs into letting her do case work in the district where his constituents lived.

She moved into the 2500 block of North Park Avenue, a neighborhood she never left.

In the early 1970s, Jacobs decided it was time for Carson to move up to the political front lines.

He recalled sitting on her living room floor for an hour in 1972, telling Carson that her time had come. Jacobs told her: "Come on, kid. This is the time to step up."

### ONLINE EXTRA INDYSTAR.COM

Go to [IndyStar.com/Carson](http://IndyStar.com/Carson) for a brief bio of U.S. Rep. Julia Carson and a glance at who might be interested in her seat. You also can read notable quotes from her political career and reflections of local, state and national political figures.

She did just that. And after serving for nearly 20 years in the Indiana General Assembly, Carson decided to look for a new challenge and was elected Center Township trustee.

She wanted the trustee's office to be a place where people were treated with dignity while getting the help they needed. She also made sure people who came for help really needed it.

In her six years as trustee, she turned

the office's \$20 million debt into a \$6 million surplus.

### Her record in Congress

In Congress, she was known for voting the party line the majority of the time, but she also was pragmatic when necessary.

In 2005, she used her position on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to get \$12.5 million in improvements for The Children's Museum in Indianapolis.

In 1999, Carson worked with Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., to increase outreach to children of the working poor who are eligible for a federal-state health insurance program.

Early this year, she teamed with a Republican congressman from Kentucky on legislation to help people on the verge of homelessness and to protect victims of domestic violence by banning the disclosure of certain information.

Carson's most notable legislative achievement was in honoring Rosa Parks in 1999 through a Congressional Gold Medal.

"I had a lingering kind of adoration in my own soul for Rosa," Carson said at the time. "I always believed in my heart that it was Rosa who paved the way for me to go to Congress and to other places. I felt like it then became my purpose to give her some honor, to repay her."

She was also a supporter of organized labor, environmental protection, abortion rights, gun control and government health-care programs.

If her background was different from those of most of her colleagues in Congress, she also knew she didn't always look like a member of Congress, either.

Carson once told the story of how another congresswoman, who didn't recognize her, haughtily informed Carson that the elevator she was on was "for members only."

Carson looked at the woman and said, "So what's your point?"

\* Call Star reporter Rob Schneider at (317) 444-6278.