

NM resident reflects on experience working for first female VP candidate Geraldine Ferraro

Pam Fleischaker recalls Ferraro's nomination as thrilling, historic

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- Pam Fleischaker served on the staff of Geraldine Ferraro during the 1984 presidential campaign.
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- Fleischaker lives in Santa Fe now and remains active in Democratic Party politics.

FARMINGTON — Pam Fleischaker had a front-row seat 36 years ago when U.S. Rep. Geraldine Ferraro became the first woman to become a vice presidential nominee for one of America's two major political parties.

Since then, a handful of other women have followed in Ferraro's footsteps as the vice presidential nominee or even as the head of the ticket – Gov. Sarah Palin, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and, most recently, U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris. So the presence of a woman on the ticket of a major party may not carry the novelty or sense of historic importance it once did.

But Fleischaker, who served on Ferraro's staff during the 1984 presidential campaign and who remains active in Democratic Party politics these days from her home in Santa Fe, said the selection of Harris to share her party's presidential ticket with presumed nominee and U.S. Sen. Joe Biden is no small matter. For those who continue to wait for a female candidate to finally break through and be part of a winning presidential ticket, Harris' nomination offers hope that this may be the year they've been waiting for.



"Now, here we go again," Fleischaker said, acknowledging the women who have gone before Harris, only to suffer an election defeat. "But this is very different, it feels to me."

Fleischaker sees considerable differences between her former boss and Harris, but she also said they also have several things in common — mostly the advantages they bring to the ticket.

"Fritz Mondale (the 1984 Democratic presidential nominee) was older," Fleischaker recalled. "He was a lovely person, a very smart, capable person. But he was sort of gray and nothing like a Bill Clinton or a Barack Obama. They knew they needed somebody to spice things up, and Biden does, too. (Harris) can put a little spring in his step."

Fleischaker also pointed to the fact that Ferraro and Harris are both former prosecutors — the former for the Queens County District Attorney's Office and the latter as the attorney general of California. Fleischaker said Ferraro's work heading the Special Victims Bureau, where she prosecuted primarily sex crimes and crimes against children, prepared her well for the rough-and-tumble world of presidential politics.

"She really got into the nitty gritty, and it toughened her," Fleischaker said. "It toughened her in many of the same ways as Kamala Harris is."

Fleischaker said she has spent a good deal of time in recent days reflecting on her experience working on the Mondale-Ferraro campaign because of Harris' recent nomination. That development brought back a lot of memories, she said, recalling how satisfying it was for her and so many others to finally see a woman placed on a national ticket by a major party.

She laughed as she related the now-famous reaction of NPR's Linda Wertheimer when word leaked during the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco that Ferraro would be chosen as Mondale's running mate. Wertheimer was standing in the lobby of her hotel when she learned the news, and she responded by yelling out, "It's a girl!"

Fleischaker said that level of excitement was shared by countless women in 1984.

"It was historic — it was historic for everyone," she said. "And it was thrilling. I think (Ferraro) was as shocked as any of us that she was going to have this historic opportunity."

Fleischaker had known the candidate since her days working in Washington as the political director for a political action committee called the Women's Campaign Fund that made donations to female candidates of both parties. That group gave Ferraro her first contribution — a \$1,000 check — when she mounted her first campaign for Congress, and it helped cement a friendship between the two women that would last until Ferraro's death in 2011.

By 1984, Fleischaker had left Washington and moved to Oklahoma City with her husband and son. But when Ferraro was named the chairwoman of the Democratic Party Platform Committee for the 1984 convention, she asked Fleischaker to join her staff as press secretary. Fleischaker quickly accepted the offer, and their friendship and trust blossomed.



When Ferraro became the vice presidential pick in the midst of the convention — surprising many observers, who believed Mondale was going to select then-San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein, now a U.S. senator — she asked Fleischaker to join her again, this time as director of women's politics.

Fleischaker said the presence of a woman on a national political ticket drew more than a few sexist, even dumb questions from members of the national media.

"There was one old coot who asked her, 'Do you know how to make blueberry muffins?'" she recalled. "Gerry said, 'Yes, very well. Do you?'"

But as she rifled through stacks of old newspaper and magazine clippings from that campaign in recent days, Fleischaker said she was surprised at how mild most of those sexist questions and remarks seemed to be, considering it was 36 years ago.

"To me, sure it's sexist," she said of the blueberry muffins question. "But I didn't think it was horrible."

What really bothered Fleischaker, and other women associated with the campaign, was when someone brought up the issue of how Ferraro felt about leaving her children at home to go to work — a query a male candidate never had to face, she pointed out.

"That's the kind of question (female candidates) don't have to put up with anymore," she said.

Ironically, it was Ferraro's marriage to businessman John Zaccaro that contributed to the defeat of the Democrats in 1984. Troubling questions arose about Zaccaro's finances, and the issue was exploited by the campaign of incumbent President Ronald Reagan. Ultimately, Mondale and Ferraro were beaten soundly, with that issue widely regarded as one of the differences in the campaign.

Fleischaker was deeply involved in the campaign's response to the allegations that arose from Zaccaro's finances. But what she remembers most from that period in her life are not the nuts and bolts of politicking and strategizing. It is her relationship with Ferraro and her attempts to keep the candidate's spirits buoyed during a demanding and tense period in her life.



Fleischaker recalled how Ferraro had a fondness for a particular brand and style of shoes, one that in the pre-Internet world could only be found at a single boutique in the Washington suburb of Georgetown. So whenever the campaign made a stop in Washington, Fleischaker made a point of going by the store and stocking up on the shoes in a variety of colors, then presenting them later to a delighted Ferraro.

"They looked good on her, and she could wear them with anything," Fleischaker said.

Another time, she recalled, Ferraro, the first vice presidential candidate of Italian descent, had been invited to speak at a prestigious Italian-American dinner in Washington. Fleischaker did not attend the event and was enjoying herself at a gathering of friends in suburban Maryland when she received a telephone call from the candidate.

"Pammy, John has really ----ed this up," a panicked Ferraro said into the phone, explaining that her husband had left her clothing bag at LaGuardia Airport in New York and that she desperately needed something to wear.

Fleischaker said she and Ferraro were not the same size, so she enlisted the help of another woman at the picnic who had an apartment in Washington, Susan Zirinsky of CBS News. They rushed into the city, picked out a couple of outfits that they thought might fit Ferraro and sped to the hotel where the dinner was being held to get her outfitted.

"She was so grateful," Fleischaker said, laughing. "She said, 'See what two Jewish girls and an Italian girl can do? We made this work.'"

In spite of the issues surrounding her husband's finances, Flesichaker described Ferraro as a good candidate and an asset to the ticket.

"She was attractive, she was funny and she didn't take herself all that seriously unless she needed to," Fleischaker said, adding that she hopes Harris is able to display those same traits during her campaign.



Fleischaker said if she could offer Harris any advice, it would be to mirror the Ferraro campaign's habit of inviting as many women as possible to their campaign stops. Whenever Ferraro would arrive in a new city to stump for Mondale, Fleischaker said she was careful to invite women from both political parties — not just the local power brokers, mostly men — to join the greeting line at campaign events.

"We really did intentionally and deliberately include women in the campaign," she said. "Our intention was to bring women to the forefront. ... And I honest to God think it paid off. She was loved on the campaign trail."