

Anne Wexler, 79, Washington power broker

By [Matt Schudel](#)

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WASHINGTON - Anne Wexler, a political power broker who founded the first major Washington lobbying firm to be led by a woman, and who was considered one of the capital's most influential lobbyists, died Aug. 7 of cancer at her home here. She was 79.

Ms. Wexler began her unlikely rise to prominence in Democratic Party circles as a Connecticut housewife who joined the PTA and zoning board.

By 1978, she had carved out an important role in the Carter White House and used her skills at compromise and negotiation to win support on Capitol Hill for the administration's legislative programs.

In 1981, she founded Wexler & Associates with two other Carter administration veterans, Gail L. Harrison and Robert Schule.

"Anne's firm became the first really major public affairs lobbying company to have a woman as leader," Harrison said this past weekend.

In a statement released Saturday night, Carter called her an exemplary and "remarkably effective" public servant.

Through "her integrity" she brought "a good image" to lobbying, he said.

At first, Ms. Wexler was openly mocked by some of the men on Washington's lobbying scene. But when she landed the Motion Picture Association of America as a client, the laughing stopped. In short order, Ms. Wexler was doing business with General Motors and American Airlines.

In 1983, she brought former Republican operative and corporate lobbyist Nancy Clark Reynolds to Wexler & Associates to create one of Washington's first bipartisan lobbying firms.

"I'm a Democrat; you're a Republican," Ms. Wexler recalled telling Reynolds in a 2007 Washingtonian magazine article. "We could join forces. It's never been done."

After Reynolds and the other early partners retired, Ms. Wexler remained affiliated with the firm, now called Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates. (The other principal partner is Robert S. Walker, a former Republican congressman from Pennsylvania.)

During the Clinton administration, Ms. Wexler was a key lobbyist and strategist for the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Her work on behalf of the Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement in 2004 won her a top award from the Australian government.

She advised Comcast in merger negotiations with AT&T, and her wide-ranging list of clients included the National Football League, Aetna Insurance, Kellogg, Bendix, and Eastman Kodak.

Washingtonian magazine pronounced Ms. Wexler one of the city's 10 most powerful lobbyists, concluding, "She is easily the most influential female lobbyist in a world still dominated by men."

Although she never sought public office in her own right, she remained a key inside player in Democratic politics. She served on the rules committees at Democratic national conventions in the 1960s and 1970s and was Carter's floor manager at the 1976 convention. She was part of the Carter and Clinton transition teams and in 1984 helped prepare Geraldine Ferraro for her vice presidential debate with George H.W. Bush.

In 1970, when her future husband, Joseph D. Duffey, ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate in Connecticut, Ms. Wexler recruited three bright young talents to work on his campaign: Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and John F. Kerry.

"I think she's the most competent woman in Democratic politics in this country," Carter political adviser Hamilton Jordan said in 1978. "She's a tough, strong, straightforward, can-do kind of person."

Anne Levy was born in New York in 1930. She graduated from Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., married a doctor, settled in Westport, Conn., and raised two sons.

She joined the PTA and zoning board, began managing local campaigns and participated in Eugene McCarthy's 1968 presidential run. After her divorce from Richard Wexler, she married Duffey in 1974 and moved to Washington.

She became associate publisher of Rolling Stone magazine, based in Washington, and was a deputy undersecretary of commerce until April 1978, when she was asked to bring some Washington know-how to the Carter White House.

From her office in the West Wing, Ms. Wexler organized the "Wednesday Group," a weekly gathering of Democratic Party elders. She was so effective at marshaling support for the administration's initiatives that one of her admirers told Newsweek, "All she needs is a clipboard and a whistle around her neck."

She was also known, throughout her career as a lobbyist, for her willingness to work on both sides of the political aisle.

“Her feeling was a democracy works not with endless fighting but through listening and compromising,” said her husband, former president of American University and former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Her husband said Ms. Wexler had battled breast cancer since 1981.

“I think very few people knew she had cancer,” Duffey said. “It didn’t slow her down a bit.”

She also leaves two sons, David Wexler of Gaithersburg, Md., and Daniel Wexler of Sanibel Island, Fla.; two stepsons, Michael Duffey of Bethesda, Md., and David Duffey of Venice, Fla.; a brother; and four grandchildren.

In 1983, when a reporter asked Ms. Wexler whether the nasty infighting of politics was difficult for a woman, she replied, “When it comes to toughness, there is no gender for that, my dear.”