

# Nan Johnson, feminist vanguard and former Monroe County legislator, dies at 92

Justin Murphy, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle



Nan Johnson, a longtime Monroe County legislator and founder of the Susan B. Anthony Center at the University of Rochester, died Nov. 25 at her home in Pasadena, California, at the age of 92.

Johnson idolized Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women's rights activists of their era. She sought to emulate them both in the scope of her work — women's rights, help for the poor, environmentalism, education, prison reform — and in her fearless approach to lawmaking and advocacy.

She is the only woman to have served as the county Legislature's majority leader and also spent 15 years as a trustee for the State University of New York. As a crowning achievement near the end of her career, she co-chaired Forum 98, an event commemorating 150 years since the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848.



"Her vision was to really have a broader (appreciation) of the importance of women voting, being involved in politics and then also women's rights as well," said Lois Giess, former president of Rochester City Council. "It's because of people like Nan Johnson that women got the courage to run for office and take leadership in political roles."

Johnson, who lived off East Avenue, was among those who fought for the creation of an East Avenue Preservation District, lest its famous mansions fall further into disrepair. But she was also attuned to more pressing issues elsewhere in the community, advocating for needle exchanges during the AIDS epidemic and more funding for women and children in poverty, among other things.

In an endorsement of one of her many reelection campaigns, the Democrat and Chronicle's editorial board wrote that Johnson was "a ferocious, articulate champion of social services to the poor, elderly and disadvantaged."

## **A devoted women's rights advocate**

Johnson was born in Pittsburgh in 1930 and graduated from Barnard College in 1952. She did not enter politics until she was 45 years old but already was an experienced campaigner and community organizer.

In her first campaign she scored an upset victory over Republican Ted Curtis to take a seat in the Monroe County Legislature representing southeast Rochester, then held it for the next 20 years. She became majority leader at the end of 1977 and served in the role for two years.



In 1983 she ran for the newly created office of Monroe County Executive but lost to Republican Lucien Morin.

In addition to her own political career, Johnson tutored another generation of female leaders, organizing political campaigns and providing financial and moral support.

Giess, who first ran for City Council at Johnson's urging, recalled the countless dinners she hosted.

"It was just simple pasta dinners, maybe a salad, some bread — but the important thing was gathering women together to be supportive of one

another," Giess said. "Nan had this wonderful, engaging way of inviting people in."

## **A commemorator of suffragette history and milestones**

Johnson retired from the Legislature in 1995 and immediately dove into a new project, the Susan B. Anthony Center at the University of Rochester. The center's founding principle was to create "a place for the recognition of women's current and past contributions that could provide encouragement to young women to enter nontraditional careers, strive to high level positions, and undertake leadership positions to being about change and raise awareness." She already had been an adjunct professor at the university.

In four years as director, Johnson helped organize two major historical commemorations for the women's rights movement: the 75th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment and the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention.



The current director of the Susan B. Anthony Center, Catherine Cerulli, called Johnson "a mentor to the end," always eager to assist.

"We embraced Nan for her insight and knowledge, but more so because of who she was: an incredibly warm, loving and supportive woman," Cerulli wrote in an email. "She never ended a call that she didn't ask, 'What can I do to support you?'"

Johnson and her husband, former UR literature professor Bill Johnson, moved to California in 2017 to be closer to their two children and three grandchildren. Bill Johnson died in May; the two were married for 65 years.

