

# *Midge Costanza, a Top Assistant to Carter, Dies at 77*

By [William Grimes](#)

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Midge Costanza, a top assistant to [President Jimmy Carter](#) whose habit of criticizing her boss and whose fractious relations with his inner circle of advisers led her to resign after less than two years on the job, died Tuesday in San Diego. She was 77.

The cause was complications of cancer, said Doreen Mattingly, a professor of women's studies at San Diego State University, who is writing her biography.

Ms. Costanza, whose title was assistant to the president for public liaison, won a place in the Carter White House by being the first prominent Democrat in New York State to support Mr. Carter, then in the "Jimmy Who?" stage of his national political career, when he started campaigning for the presidency in 1975.

The vice mayor of Rochester at the time and a member of the Democratic National Committee, Ms. Costanza delivered peppery speeches on the campaign trail and gave Mr. Carter valuable access to women and ethnic working-class Democrats. After serving, with William vanden Heuvel, as chairman of Mr. Carter's state campaign organization and seconding his nomination in a speech at the Democratic convention, she became the first woman to hold the title assistant to the president.

From an office in the West Wing next to the president's, she met with and listened to the myriad interest groups clamoring for his attention, from the Chamber of Commerce and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to the National Gay Task Force and the National Swimming Pool Institute.

Ms. Costanza, a petite, energetic woman who once described herself as "a loud-mouthed, pushy little broad," was outspokenly committed to women's issues, gay rights and social justice for minority groups. She soon gained a reputation for running a cheerily disorganized operation open to previously excluded groups and for making public comments that rankled President Carter and the top advisers known as the Georgia Mafia, especially Hamilton Jordan, the president's chief of staff.

Two instances stood out. In the summer of 1977 at the White House, she hosted a group of 30 presidential appointees, all women, who protested the president's opposition to providing federal money to poor women seeking abortions.

A few months later, in a television interview, she became the first member of the White House staff to call for the resignation of Bert Lance, the director of the [Office of Management and Budget](#), then being accused of financial improprieties.



Midge Costanza and President Jimmy Carter, who selected her as the first woman to hold the title assistant to the president. Credit...The Midge Costanza Institute, via Associated Press

In May 1978, Ms. Costanza, her responsibilities drastically reduced, was reassigned to a basement office and stripped of her staff. "At least it's hard to commit suicide down here," she said of her new office.

On Aug. 1, 1978, citing differences with the president on her approach to issues and on friction with his staff, she resigned.

Margaret Costanza was born on Nov. 28, 1932, in LeRoy, N.Y., where her father, a Sicilian immigrant, ran an Italian sausage-making business. When she was 5, the family moved to Rochester. She is survived by her brother, Anthony, of Rochester.

She did grass-roots work for W. Averell Harriman's campaign for governor in 1954, and in 1964 managed Robert F. Kennedy's campaign for the Senate in Monroe County.

In 1973, she won a seat on the Rochester City Council by the largest margin in the city's history, becoming its first female member. By custom, she should have been named mayor by her fellow council members. Breaking with tradition, they elected her to the ceremonial position of vice mayor.

She first met Mr. Carter, then the campaign chairman of the Democratic National Committee, when he came to Rochester in 1974 to help in her unsuccessful run for Congress against Barber Conable.

“He impressed me so much, I told him, ‘Remember me if you decide to run for president,’ ” she told The New York Times in 1978. He did.

After resigning from her White House job, Ms. Costanza moved to Los Angeles and managed Shirley MacLaine’s “Higher Self” seminars. In 1990, she moved to San Diego, where she worked on several political campaigns, including those of Senator Barbara Boxer and Representative Lynn Schenk, and directed training seminars for prospective political candidates.

From 2000 to 2003, she was a special assistant to Gov. Gray Davis of California, serving as a liaison to women’s groups. In 2005, she became a public affairs officer for the San Diego District Attorney’s Office.