

Liz Carpenter, Journalist, Feminist and Johnson Aide, Dies at 89

By [Enid Nemy](#) March 20, 2010

Liz Carpenter, who spent much of her life working the corridors of power in Washington as a newspaper reporter, an aide to Lyndon B. Johnson when he was vice president and press secretary to Lady Bird Johnson during her years in the White House, died on Saturday in Austin, Tex. She was 89.

The cause of death was pneumonia, her daughter, Christy Carpenter, said in a telephone interview on Saturday. She said her mother had been admitted to University Medical Center Brackenridge in Austin on Wednesday.

A dedicated feminist, [Ms. Carpenter](#) was a founder of the National Women's Political Caucus and joint chairwoman of ERAmerica, an organization that unsuccessfully fought for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s.

Before joining the White House staff, she had covered Washington as a reporter for a news service she founded with her husband, Les Carpenter.

Widely known for her caustic and sometimes bawdy wit, Ms. Carpenter was irreverent about herself and her access to power during the Johnson years in Washington. She was also one of the few White House staff members who had no qualms about giving as good as she got, no matter the source.

"Why don't you use your head?" Mr. Johnson once bellowed at her. She bellowed back: "I'm too busy trying to use yours!"

Ms. Carpenter's association with the Johnsons began in 1960, when Johnson, then the Senate majority leader, was running for vice president on the Democratic ticket headed by Senator John F. Kennedy. One of her tasks was to stage rallies in the South that were known as Flying Tea Parties.

"The name of the game," Ms. Carpenter once recalled, "was to take those funny-talking Kennedy ladies from Massachusetts, with Lady Bird at the helm, and hit Texas and other states in the Bible Belt and prove that Roman Catholics didn't have horns and tails."

After the election, Ms. Carpenter was named Mr. Johnson's executive assistant. She was in the motorcade in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated. She wrote the brief speech Mr. Johnson delivered at the foot of Air Force One when he returned to Washington as the 36th president. ("This is a sad time for all people," he said, adding, "I ask for your help — and God's.")



Liz Carpenter at Lady Bird Johnson's burial in July 2007. Credit...Pool photo by Jay Janner, via Associated Press

Ms. Carpenter spent the next five years as Mrs. Johnson's press secretary. She coordinated news coverage of the White House weddings of both Johnson daughters, Lynda Bird and Luci Baines, and Mrs. Johnson's many trips, including a widely publicized raft trip down the Rio Grande in 1966. She wrote about her White House years in a 1970 book, "Ruffles and Flourishes."

In 1971, out of the White House, Ms. Carpenter turned her energy to women's causes, including the fight for an Equal Rights Amendment. Her efforts to establish the National Women's Political Caucus grew out of a commitment to seeing more women elected to state and federal posts.

Earlier, Ms. Carpenter was a prime mover in the battle to permit women to join the National Press Club, which had been an important institution in Washington for reporters as well as politicians since its founding in 1908. Before being accepted as members, women with press credentials fought to be admitted at least to the club luncheons at which visiting heads of state customarily appeared.

"We made a great breakthrough in 1956," Helen Thomas, a reporter who has covered Washington since World War II, once recalled. "Liz Carpenter got them to agree to let us sit in the balcony of the ballroom, in purdah, and listen to the luncheon speaker as we looked down on our press colleagues and the public relations men and the lobbyists as they ate."

It was not until 1971 that women were admitted as members.

In her 1987 memoir "Getting Better All the Time," Ms. Carpenter credited Eleanor Roosevelt with helping to open doors for women in the press.

It was Mrs. Roosevelt, she said, who forced the wire services to hire women by allowing only women to cover her news conferences and who saw to it that “the stories were about substance, not hats.” Ms. Carpenter was among the reporters at one of those events.

From 1972 to 1976, Ms. Carpenter was a vice president of Hill & Knowlton, a Washington public relations firm. She did some lobbying for clients like the Wine Institute and Sears, Roebuck & Company but spent most of her time planning promotional events. She returned to Texas in 1976.

Mary Elizabeth Sutherland was born in Salado, Tex. on Sept. 1, 1920, the middle of five children — three brothers and one sister — of Thomas Shelton Sutherland, a rancher who later went into the road construction business, and Mary Elizabeth Sutherland.

A sixth-generation Texan, she counted among her forebears one who wrote the Texas Declaration of Independence and one who died at the Alamo.

The family later moved to Austin, where Ms. Carpenter was editor of her high school newspaper. She went on to the University of Texas at Austin and studied journalism.



Ms. Carpenter, left, at the opening of the First Women’s Bank in New York in 1975 with Bella Abzug, a congresswoman and feminist, and the consumer advocate Betty Furness. Credit...Caren Golden/Pictorial Parade/Getty Images

As a graduation present in 1942, she took a trip to Washington and decided to stay, finding work as an assistant to the correspondent for 26 small Michigan newspapers.

She also looked up her congressman from Texas but found he had gone off to war. Instead, she met the congressman's wife — Lady Bird Johnson — who was running his office. It was the beginning of their long friendship.

In Washington, in 1944, she married Les Carpenter, a high school sweetheart who had been a fellow journalism student at the University of Texas. The Johnsons attended their wedding.

Shortly afterward, Ms. Carpenter got a job as a reporter with United Press.

When the war ended, the couple organized the Carpenter News Bureau in Washington, reporting for some 20 Southwestern newspapers. Mr. Carpenter died in 1974.

In addition to her daughter, of New York, Ms. Carpenter is survived by a son, Scott, of Vashon, Wash., a granddaughter and a grandson.

Her daughter said the most enduring lesson her mother had instilled at home was “remember to laugh.”

At 71, after her children had long since left the house, Ms. Carpenter became the unexpected mother of the three youngest children of her brother Tom Sutherland, who had died of cancer. When the mother of the children, who ranged from 11 to 16, and their older siblings were unable to look after them, Ms. Carpenter took charge.

That experience was captured in “Unplanned Parenthood: The Confessions of a Seventy-something Surrogate Mother,” a book Ms. Carpenter wrote in 1994.

Ms. Carpenter maintained her close ties with the Johnsons after their return to Texas and in 1992 organized Mrs. Johnson's 80th birthday party for 1,000 guests in Austin. Mrs. Johnson died in 2007.

“It never occurred to me not to work,” Ms. Carpenter said in a 1987 interview, shortly after she had undergone a mastectomy, adding, “I had a restless spirit that kept drawing me to new adventures.” She never hesitated, she said, “to charge hell with a bucket of water.”