

Remembering Dr. Shelley Fernandez: 95 Years of Fierce Love and Unstoppable Justice

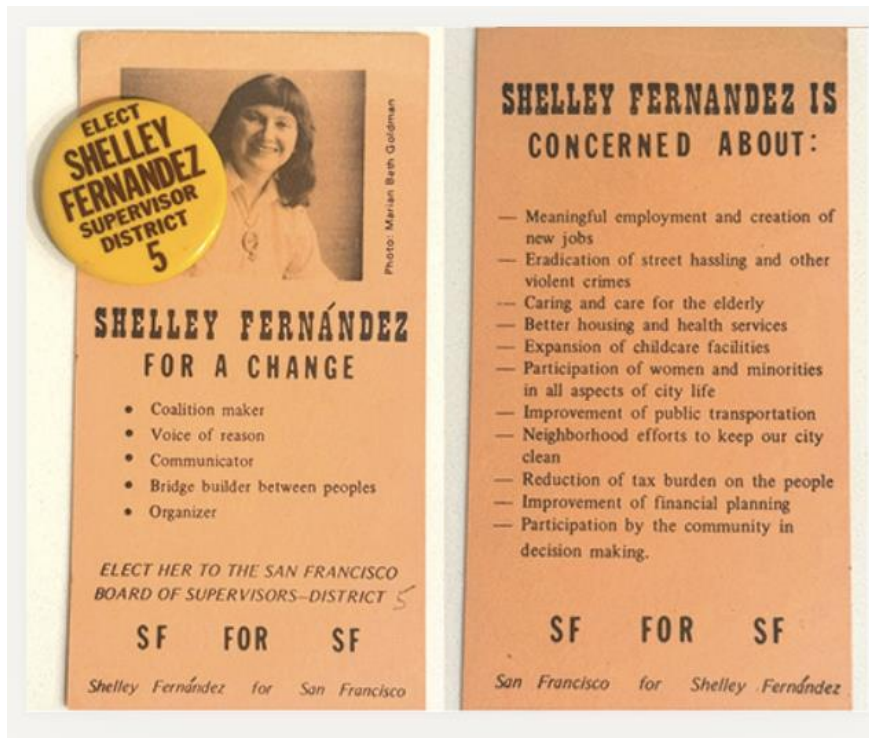


Left: Shelley Fernandez held a picture of the late Keiko Fukuda, August 2025. Photo: SUSAN BERSTON; Right: Shelley Fernandez won a baby photo contest. Photo: SHELLEY FERNANDEZ COLLECTION

By Susan Berston –

Dr. Joan Shelley Wilks Fernandez (Shelley Fernandez) understood that true empowerment required both sanctuary—building shelters for women in crisis—and strength—self-defense through judo. She built institutions that provided both—co-founding La Casa de las Madres, San Francisco’s pioneering shelter for survivors of domestic violence; establishing Our Lady of Guadalupe Health Center, a free medical clinic to serve low-income women; and serving as President of San Francisco and National NOW (National Organization for Women); and this barely scratches the surface.

On November 7, 2025, at age 95, the world lost one of its most tireless defenders for those who suffered—women, Latines, African Americans, Asian Americans, Soviet Jews, Native Americans, those impacted by HIV, Cubans in need, and gays and lesbians. Fernandez spent decades building institutions that would endure beyond her lifetime—each embodying her belief that women’s liberation required both political power and personal empowerment.



Left: In 1975, Shelley Fernandez fearlessly ran against Harvey Milk for District 5 supervisor. (Photo: SUSAN BERSTON); Right: A Shelley Fernandez badge from the 1975 Philadelphia NOW (Photo: SUSAN BERSTON)

Fearlessly leading numerous demonstrations, including one alongside Cesar Chavez, Fernandez fought for the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights. She sued to integrate women and people of color into the San Francisco Police Department and advocated for the historic ordination of the first eleven Episcopal women priests. On national television, she debated anti-feminist activist Phyllis Schlafly. In a 2021 interview with *The Noe Valley Voice*, she vowed: “Until my last breath, I will do all that I can to help women.”

Born in 1930 in Brooklyn, New York, to a former chorus line dancer turned bookkeeper mother and a mostly unemployed vaudeville father, Fernandez had a relentless determination to alleviate those

who suffered, which was revealed to her when her mother surrendered the family's only bed. In 1939, as described in a May 2025 oral history interview (<https://bit.ly/48kvU3y>), a blind man, recently released from Auschwitz, along with his wife and two children, arrived to occupy the family's next-door apartment.

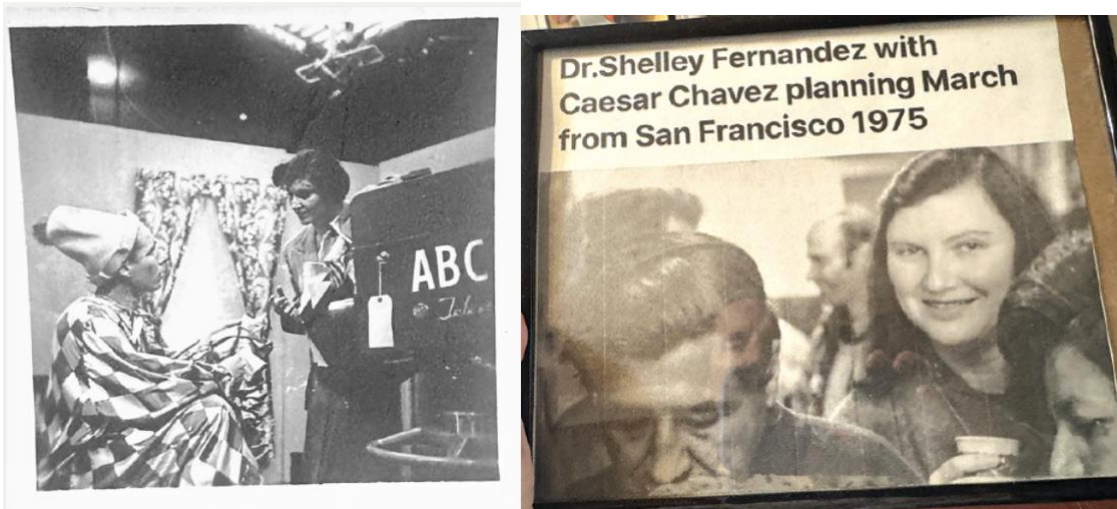


Shelley Fernandez

and Keiko Fukuda (Photo: SHELLEY FERNANDEZ COLLECTION)

She vividly recalled: “My mother turned to my father and said, ‘We’re giving them our bed.’ And my father said, ‘What are you talking about? All we have is our bed.’ And she said, ‘I said, we’re giving them our bed. And that’s it.’ I never heard her talk like that to my father. And he was sort of taken aback. Next thing I know, they moved their bed in there.” Fernandez and her brother shared the sofa.

After her father declared, “No woman in this family will ever go to college,” 16-year-old Fernandez finished high school early and left for New York with \$11. She worked as an usherette at the Royale Theater with the likes of Lee Strasberg, Anthony Franciosa, and Erwin Piscator, and studied theater—with the hope of someday becoming a director. “That’s the only thing in my life I have not been able to achieve; my greatest passion and my greatest ability is in theater directing,” she reflected.



Left: Shelley Fernandez at ABC TV in New York (1949) Photo: SHELLEY FERNANDEZ COLLECTION; Right: Shelley Fernandez and Cesar Chavez (1975) Photo: SHELLEY FERNANDEZ COLLECTION

Next, Fernandez found herself at Dumont Television as a floor manager of a space adventure show, *Captain Video*. After grueling hours setting the stage and cuing actors, Fernandez recalled: “In 1939, that was the time I decided, even though I was involved in theater, that I was going to do something about people who were suffering and had hardships in life, and my life did take that course.”

With the help of a former high school teacher who raised funds, Fernandez landed in Oakland, CA, at Mills College, where she earned a degree in theater directing in 1955. In 1957, she earned her teaching credential and master’s degree at San Francisco State College, and, in 1978, a PhD in health administration from Walden University. While working as a Vice Principal in Daly City, Fernandez also taught at Stanford University throughout the 1970s, developing Chicano studies curriculum when ethnic studies programs first emerged.



Shelley Fernandez and her beloved German Shepard, Hachiko. May 3, 2025
(Photo: SUSAN BERSTON)

Along with Keiko Fukuda—a tenth-degree black belt and the highest-ranking woman in judo history, with whom Fernandez shared a 47-year partnership—they co-founded what became the only women-only judo school at 1622 Castro Street in San Francisco. Upon Fukuda's death in 2013, the Keiko Fukuda and Shelley Fernandez Judo and Self Defense Foundation for Girls and Women was established. Fernandez tirelessly worked to ensure that Fukuda's legacy—and the tradition of women's self-defense they built together—would endure. Fernandez traveled to Patiala, India, five times in order to establish fifteen judo schools in the lowest caste system.

She was an educator, director, organizer, animal lover, priestess, activist, humanitarian, warrior for justice, loyal friend, and more. That nine-year-old girl who watched her mother's fierce compassion grew into a warrior who changed the world through a script that she wrote on her very own.



Shelley Fernandez in Patiala, India, 2017

Photo: ROBYN KENKEL

Deep gratitude to Openhouse SF and the San Francisco Village Del & Phyllis posse, who surrounded Shelley with support, learning, and community in her final years.

Susan Berston teaches business at City College of San Francisco and documents oral histories on video. She treasures Susan Sunderland for introducing her to “The Infamous and Notorious Shelley Fernandez,” as Berston affectionately referred to Shelley.

In Memoriam

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