

September 3, 2026

My Friend, Gloria Steinem



Gloria and Eleanor, 2006

Gloria Steinem died today. I learned this as I sipped my morning coffee and looked at my iPhone. Her name and photos were all over the screen. For the rest of the day I was assailed by memories and a sense of profound sadness and loss. I'll miss her wisdom, kindness, brilliance, bravery, modesty, vision and passion.

I shouldn't have been shocked at the bad news, but I was. After all, Gloria was 92 years of age! Thoughts about our decades of friendship and activism were overwhelming. It all felt unreal, painful, impossible to process. Of course, I knew it was coming, inevitable, but still....

Our paths had been crossing less and less at conferences or events--and more and more at funerals and memorial services. There, she usually openly cried, lamenting the losses as one by one, the pioneers of the modern women's movement left this earth--or alternatively, were bundled off to nursing homes, hospices or memory care centers. Over the years I watched Gloria grow ever more stooped and frail, her famous light slowly dimming with the passage of time. But she "loved life so much," she said, hoped she'd never die or at least live until 100. I wish she had.

The last time I saw Gloria was at a memorial service where we were both scheduled to speak. I remember having to hold her hand in order to get her up onto the podium because she was so unsteady. My great fear was that I couldn't manage successfully to haul her up there and that we would both topple down the steps in disgrace.

Gloria did not come early to feminism, as many believe. She came through the portal of abortion and became really committed during the August 26, 1970 march down Fifth Avenue, i.e., Women's Strike for Equality. But she singlehandedly, I believed, changed the worst, most degrading cultural attitudes towards our movement. Until Gloria came on the

scene we were routinely reviled by men and women alike as weirdos, kukes, crazies, manhater, lesbos, etc. Gloria Steinem was so attractive, non-threatening, rational and authentic that she became the face of feminism, defanging the opposition and mesmerizing both genders by her leadership and witty aphorisms. (Women need a man like a fish needs a bicycle.) She became the beautiful, acceptable face of the modern feminist revolution, our attractive, *Pied Piper* and leader.

For all her gifts, charm and fame, Gloria was also modest, perhaps even shy. She was forever deflecting, re-centering attention on others and away from herself. When she was introduced to someone, they invariably would gush and say what an honor it was to meet her. But Gloria would look at them with her kind, warmly attentive eyes and respond, "Oh NO! it is MY honor to meet You!" And that person would invariably go away feeling like a million bucks.

She married David Bale in her 60's but that happiness only lasted 3 years, much of it spent at Sloan Kettering where Gloria would pace the halls waiting for a medical miracle that did not happen. I remember watching them together, before cancer took him. David was always reaching out to touch her, was always touching her when he was in her presence.

Although Gloria was a much sought after speaker, she never seemed quite comfortable at the mic, I felt. She usually sprinkled her talks with a little profanity in order to help the audiences relax, but also as a way to seem relaxed, accessible and natural herself. When she could, Gloria re-routed the spotlight from herself and onto others. Read, spoke, quoted and promoted the words of other people wherever possible, while the audience hungrily focused on her, wanted to hear HER words and thoughts. Often, she preferred to share the podium with a partner, preferably a female of color. As a young woman she unaccountably hid her beautiful face behind aviator glasses and her long blond hair.

Gloria used every birthday as an occasion to raise money for a particular feminist organization or charity. Again, the same theme, the spine that ran through her life: Birthdays were not to celebrate herself, but to help others.

And now, as president of Veteran Feminists of America, I want to end with a word about Gloria Steinem's longstanding, strong, public and consistent connection with our organization.

She served as our Board Advisor; attended and supported our functions; publicized the VFA mission to document and preserve the achievements of Second Wave feminism and feminists; wrote, signed and promoted fundraising letters on our behalf; served as a reliable and enthusiastic resource for multiple projects--and was our greatest cheerleader!

Her story, along with 850 other pioneers, is published in our archives and website (veteranfeministsofamerica.org) under our Pioneer Histories Project. [Click here to access her story](#) in our Collection.

Finally, with profound respect and gratitude to Gloria Steinem, and in her honor, I WILL MAKE MY DONATION TO VFA THIS YEAR IN HER NAME. I HOPE YOU WILL DO THE SAME!

Eleanor Pam, President

Veteran Feminists of America