

'Her imprint will last a long time': Yellowknife advocate Ruth Spence dies at 89

Spence was recipient of Order of the N.W.T., long-time activist for women and girls

[CBC News](#) Posted: Oct 17, 2016 12:31 PM CT Last Updated: Oct 17, 2016 1:37 PM CT

Ruth Spence, a well-known activist in Yellowknife and a recipient of the Order of the Northwest Territories, died on Sunday morning.

Spence, who was just days away from her 90th birthday, was a community advocate for the last 50 years. She was the first executive director of Yellowknife's YWCA, opening the first facility in the city, and lobbied tirelessly to establish programs for women and children in the city.

Spence was a registered nurse, a multiple-term city councillor and was a member of the Stanton Hospital Board. She was also a founding member of the Yellowknife Ski Club.

Yellowknife activist Ruth Spence with Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (centre) and her husband Bob Spence, in Yellowknife in the late 1960s. Ruth Spence was president of the Western Arctic Liberal Association. (submitted by Duff Spence)

"The community is poorer for her passing, but I think we can be proud as a family of what she accomplished and what she advocated for within Yellowknife over the last 50 years," her son Duff Spence told CBC.

"It's a sad day but we still love her and feel like her imprint will last a long time on Yellowknife."

Ruth Spence was a registered nurse. She and her husband settled in Yellowknife in 1964. (CBC)

As a champion for the rights of women and children in Yellowknife, Spence was among the first group of recipients of the Order of the N.W.T. in 2015 in recognition of her community leadership.

Her son says, sadly, she was suffering from dementia by then.

"It's very difficult for a woman who was so driven in her life to be afflicted with dementia and in the early years know what was coming."

Still, he thinks she understood the honour.

"She could be proud of what she accomplished," Duff Spence said.

"She wasn't a person who garnered the light; she was very uncomfortable with people saying thank you. But it was truly a proud moment for all of us."

'Gruff and hard' but loving grandmother

Duff Spence said as a mother, she could be tough, with high expectations for her children, but he added that his mom was a wonderful grandmother to her 14 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Ruth Spence received the Order of the Northwest Territories in 2015. (Government of the Northwest Territories)

"A lot of people know my mom as gruff and hard, but completely different with the grandchildren and the great grandchildren. It was her joy, later in life, to enjoy all of them. It was great to see."

Ruth Spence spent her final years at Aven Manor seniors home.

"They treated her with respect and honour," Duff Spence said, his voice breaking.

He says the family knew in the last week that the end was coming, and his mother was surrounded by friends and family.

"She held herself with grace, and went with grace."

The family has yet to make funeral arrangements.