

A woman with passion

Former city councillor and women's advocate Ruth Spence dies just before 90th birthday

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Northern News Services
Wednesday, October 19, 2016

SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE

If there is one thing people could agree upon about Ruth Spence, it's that her passion made her a "force to be reckoned with."



Ruth Spence, 90, was an outspoken voice for women and families. The former city councillor and Order of the NWT recipient was described by many as one of Yellowknife's last real matriarchs. - photo courtesy of Art Sorensen

The former Yellowknife city councillor and pioneering advocate for women died of kidney failure on Sunday morning.

She would have been 90-years old on Friday.

"She was certainly committed to the community and spent a lot of time working and fighting for people," said her son Duff Spence.

Last year, Spence became one of the first five people inducted into the Order of the Northwest Territories for her work in the community.



Ruth Spence, left, walks alongside former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and her husband Bob Spence in Yellowknife in 1968. - photo courtesy of Duff Spence

She served as a former president of the Western Arctic Liberal Association, on the advisory council for the Status of Women and had even run for mayor.

Originally from Ontario, Spence moved to Yellowknife with her husband in 1946 to live at the Giant Mine camp, where he worked.

She quickly became an outspoken advocate for women, taking over the helm of the YWCA as the organization's first executive director.

The city's first daycare centre was soon established under her leadership, along with summer camps for children and after-school programs.

She was a champion for women and families at a time when society was in transition, her son Kit Spence said.

"The '60s were a real revolutionary time in a sense and women's rights came to the fore," Kit said.

"My mother, along with a number of other women in the community, recognized it was time to step up."

She wasn't afraid to call on politicians when she wanted something done either.

"She would phone the minister of health on a regular basis to talk about health programs. She would phone the president of the housing corporation to talk about social programs, even in the last five to 10 years," Duff said. "She wanted to be part of the community and she had something to say."

On Monday, Yellowknife Centre MLA Julie Green paid tribute to Spence's accomplishments at the legislative assembly. She was well known by people in the political sphere, leaving a lasting impression on the next generation of leaders.

Kam Lake MLA Kieron Testart remembers Spence as a mentor who showed him what it meant to never give up.

"It was amazing to see her passion and her commitment to a cause that was bigger than herself," he said.

He still recalls one of the first times he worked with her at a Liberal event following former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's election, and the "passion and ferocity" with which she asked Testart whether he wanted to change that. Watching her was an inspiration for a young person like him who wanted to make a difference, he said.

"Without people like Ruth, I could never have made it as far as running for MLA and getting elected, which is of course my job today."

Spence's enthusiasm wasn't reserved for the public sphere. Her son Kit remembers their family home in Yellowknife as a bustling place where there was an underlying political debate in nearly every conversation.

A few times a year, his mother would host parties where "anybody who was anybody" in town would show up to discuss the issues of the day, he said. That attitude rubbed off on her five children.

"She was a hard mom," Duff laughed. "She expected a lot."

But that is what made him who he is today, he said, adding it's what taught him and his siblings the importance of participating in their community.

Aside from Kit and Duff, Spence is survived by three other children: Pat, John and Matt. A sixth child, Andrew David, died as an infant.

Spence was also a loving grandmother to her 14 grandchildren, four great-grandchildren and her husband of 50 years, who died of cancer in 2005, Duff said.

She had been living with dementia for the last few years and was staying at Aven Manor, Duff said.

Although she didn't see her official birthday, Spence had one last chance to meet with the people she's impacted in her lifetime at a birthday party held in her honour this July.

"I'm proud of my mother and what she accomplished in the community," Duff told Yellowknifer.

"She helped a lot of people."