

First Ladies of America



The daughter of an independent, socially connected mother and a father who often traveled in his sales job, Betty Ford grew up the youngest of three children in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

She preferred to be called by her first name, Elizabeth, but it would never stick; she would be called Betty all her life. Strong and energetic, Mrs. Ford took dance lessons and dreamed of becoming a professional dancer. She modeled at a local department store, and at home she could hold her own playing football and ice hockey with her two older brothers.

Before meeting and marrying Gerald Ford, the young lawyer and future congressman, she lived in New York City for a time. She studied dance with the famous Martha Graham, danced in Graham's troupe, and modeled professionally for the John Roberts Powers Agency.

Returning to Grand Rapids, she married and then divorced when the marriage became abusive. Friends introduced her to Ford, and their wedding and honeymoon gave her a preview of the future she would share with him. Busy campaigning for Congress, Ford was late for the wedding, and on their honeymoon, he took his wife to a campaign rally, a University of Michigan football game, and a speech by Thomas Dewey, who was running for president.

When President Nixon resigned during the Watergate scandal, elevating her husband to the Oval Office, she became First Lady with no time to prepare for her new role. She made remarkable achievements in the White House, primarily in working for the rights of women. However, her strong vocal support of the Equal Rights Amendment and the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision made her a controversial figure.

The controversy became a firestorm in 1975 when she appeared on the television program 60 Minutes, speaking candidly about her views on marijuana and premarital sex. She was Betty Ford speaking honestly, just as she had spoken openly months earlier about being diagnosed with breast cancer, undergoing a mastectomy, suffering bouts of depression, and receiving psychiatric care. When the news circulated that she was being so severely criticized, however, mail in her support poured into the White House.

Many Americans wrote that they disagreed with her views but admired her for being direct. At one time, her popularity rating as first lady reached 75 percent, and during the presidential election campaign of 1976, "Vote for Betty's Husband" became a favorite campaign slogan. Mrs. Ford continued to lobby for the Equal Rights Amendment, even after her husband lost the presidential election to Jimmy Carter. In her last speech as First Lady at the University of Michigan, Mrs. Ford chose to speak about the importance of passing the ERA.

Gerald R. Ford Administration, 1974-1977

After leaving the White House, Mrs. Ford confronted the addiction to pain medications and alcohol that she had developed over the years. Just as she had shared with the public the facts about her breast cancer and mastectomy to encourage women to have mammograms, she now spoke candidly about her alcoholism to raise public awareness and encourage treatment. Once in recovery, she co-founded the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif., a non-profit hospital dedicated to helping patients overcome addiction and reclaim their lives.

When Mrs. Ford died on July 8, 2011, her funeral was attended by other former first ladies, in keeping with a tradition that had begun with Eleanor Roosevelt's funeral.

Elizabeth Ann "Betty" Bloomer Warren Ford

Born: April 8, 1918, in Chicago

Education: Central High School, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Bennington College; School of Dance, Bennington, Vermont

Marriage: 1942 to William Gustavus Warren; 1948 to Gerald Rudolph "Jerry" Ford

Children: Michael Gerald (1950); John Gardner (1952);

Steven Meigs (1956); Susan Elizabeth (1957)

Died: July 8, 2011, at Rancho Mirage

