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Flo Kennedy, Feminist, Civil Rights Advocate and Flamboyant Gadfly, Is Dead at 84

Photo: Flo Kennedy, left, with her sisters Joy and Faye in 1977. Flo Kennedy said her parents thought their daughters could do almost no wrong. (Frank C. Dougherty)

Florynce Kennedy, a lawyer and political activist whose flamboyant attire and sometimes outrageous comments drew attention to her fierce struggle for civil rights and feminism, died on Thursday in her Manhattan apartment. She was 84.

Known to everyone as Flo, recognizable everywhere in cowboy hat and pink sunglasses, she was one of the first black women to graduate from Columbia Law School, where she was admitted after threatening a discrimination suit. She fought in the courts and on the streets for abortion rights, represented Black Panthers, was a founding member of the National Women's Political Caucus and led a mass urination by women protesting a lack of women's restrooms at Harvard.

''If you found a cause for the downtrodden of somebody being abused someplace, by God, Flo Kennedy would be there,'' former Mayor David N. Dinkins of New York said yesterday.

People magazine in 1974 called her ''the biggest, loudest and, indisputably, the rudest mouth on

the battleground where feminist activists and radical politics join in mostly common cause.''

Justice Emily Jane Goodman of New York State Supreme Court said Ms. Kennedy gave women courage. ''She showed a whole generation of us the right way to live our lives,'' Justice Goodman said.

Friends like Gloria Steinem reveled in her razor-sharp wit. Ms. Steinem, who lectured with Ms. Kennedy in the 1970's, said a man in the audience would all too often stand up and demand, ''Are you lesbians?''

Ms. Kennedy would respond that it depended. ''Are you my alternative?'' she would ask.

Ms. Steinem said by phone from Hawaii yesterday, ''She understood what Emma Goldman understood: there has to be laughter and fun at the revolution, or it isn't a revolution.''

Marie Wilson, president of the Ms. Foundation, yesterday called Ms. Kennedy ''one of the most wonderfully outrageous pioneers of feminism in America.''

Florynce Rae Kennedy, the second of five daughters, was born on Feb. 11, 1916, in Kansas City, Mo. Her father was a Pullman porter and later owned a taxi business. He once stood up with a shotgun to members of the Ku Klux Klan who wanted to drive him from a home he had bought in a mainly white neighborhood.

In her autobiography, ''Color Me Flo: My Hard Life and Good Times'' (1976), she said her parents almost never criticized their daughters. In fact, they could seemingly do almost no wrong. ''We were taught very early in the game that we didn't have to respect the teachers, and if they threatened to hit us, we could act as if they weren't anybody we had to pay any attention to,'' she wrote.

After graduating from high school, Ms. Kennedy opened a hat shop in Kansas City with her sisters. Within a few years, she was involved in her first political protest, helping organize a boycott when the local Coca-Cola bottler refused to hire black truck drivers.

After the death of her mother, Zella, from cancer, Ms. Kennedy and her sister Grayce moved to New York. Ignoring those who urged her to become a teacher, she enrolled in pre-law courses at Columbia University. ''I find that the higher you aim, the better you shoot,'' she wrote.

She applied to Columbia Law School, but was refused admission. She was told the reason was not that she was black, but that she was a woman. Justice Goodman said she answered, ''To my friends at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, it all sounds the same.''

After threatening a lawsuit, Ms. Kennedy was admitted. She was one of eight women and the only black in her class. She graduated in 1951 and worked briefly for a Manhattan law firm before opening her own law office in 1954. Business was not good, and she had to take a job at Bloomingdale's one Christmas to pay the rent.

One of her cases involved representing the estates of the jazz greats Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker to recover money owed them by record companies. Even though she won the cases, the experience soured her on the law.

''Handling the Holiday and Parker estates taught me more than I was really ready for about government and business delinquency and the hostility and helplessness of the courts,'' she wrote. ''Not only was I not earning a decent living, there began to be a serious question in my mind whether practicing law could ever be an effective means of changing society or even of simple resistance to oppression.''

She turned to political activism, setting up an organization called the Media Workshop in 1966 to fight racism in journalism and advertising. Picketing an advertising agency led to the protesters' being invited upstairs to state their case. She said, ''Ever since I've been able to say, 'When you want to get to the suites, start in the streets.' ''

Her strategy became to go after the biggest targets possible. ''Grass-roots organizing is like climbing into bed with a malaria patient in order to show how much you love him or her, then catching malaria yourself,'' she wrote. ''I say if you want to kill poverty, go to Wall Street and kick -- or disrupt.''

Increasingly, her legal cases were almost always political. ''Sweetie,'' she said, ''if you're not living on the edge, then you're taking up space.''
In 1966, she represented H. Rap Brown, the civil rights leader. In 1968, she sued the Roman Catholic Church for what she viewed as interference with abortion. In 1969, she organized a group of feminist lawyers to challenge the constitutionality of New York State's abortion law, an action credited with helping influence the Legislature to liberalize abortion the next year.

In 1969, she helped represent 21 Black Panthers on trial in Manhattan for conspiracy to commit bombings, among other things. They were eventually acquitted, but during the trial she used them for another purpose.

She and Ms. Goodman, not then a judge, and others were renting a house on Fire Island. They decided to take the Panthers to a community on the island for a dinner at a restaurant that did not accept blacks or Jews. It created quite a commotion, the intended effect. But afterward, Ms. Goodman asked if it was all that important, compared with the life and death issues at stake in the trial.

Ms. Kennedy gave an emphatic yes. "Her point was that you have to fight on all the fronts all the time," Justice Goodman said.

Other fronts included founding the Feminist Party in 1971. Its first act was to nominate Representative Shirley Chisholm, Democrat of New York, for president.

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In 1967, Ms. Kennedy attended a rally against the Vietnam War in Montreal. Bobby Seale, the Black Panther, was not allowed to speak. "I went berserk," she wrote. "I took the platform and started yelling and hollering." An invitation for Ms. Kennedy to speak in Washington followed, and a 20-year lecturing career was born. She made $3,500 a lecture at her peak.

Ms. Steinem called her lectures with Ms. Kennedy on the college circuit “the Thelma and Louise of the 70’s.” Ms. Steinem said, "I definitely speak first because after Flo I would have been an anticlimax."

In 1957, Ms. Kennedy married Charles Dye, a writer 10 years her junior. He died a few years later. "Anyone who marries a drunk Welshman doesn't deserve sympathy," she once said.

Her views on the exclusivity of marriage were not much brighter. "Why would you lock yourself in the bathroom just because you have to go three times a day," she wrote.

Ms. Kennedy is survived by three sisters, Joy Kennedy Banks of East Orange, N.J., Faye Kennedy Daly of Honolulu and Grayce Kennedy Bayles of Queens.

As her health failed, her spirit did not. In her autobiography, she wrote: "I'm just a loud-mouthed, middle-aged colored lady with a fused spine and three feet of intestines missing, and a lot of people think I'm crazy. Maybe you do too, but I never stopped to wonder why I'm not like other people. The mystery to me is why more people aren't like me."