News



In this April 10, 1961, file photo, President John F. Kennedy and his sister, Jean Kennedy Smith, watch an opening day baseball game at Griffith Stadium in Washington. Smith, the youngest sister and last surviving sibling of President John F. Kennedy, died at 92, her daughter Kym confirmed to the New York Times. (AP/File)

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Jean Kennedy Smith, who was the last surviving sibling of President John F. Kennedy and who as a U.S. ambassador played a key role in the peace process in Northern Ireland, has died, relatives said Thursday. She was 92.

Former U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, Smith's nephew, confirmed her death. She died June 17 at her home in Manhattan, her daughter Kym told The New York Times.

Smith was the eighth of nine children born to Joseph P. and Rose Kennedy, and tragically several of them preceded her in death by decades. Her siblings included older brother Joseph Kennedy Jr., killed in action during World War II; Kathleen "Kick" Kennedy, who died in a 1948 plane crash; the president, assassinated in 1963 and Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, slain in 1968. Sen. Edward Kennedy, the youngest of the Kennedy siblings, died of brain cancer in August 2009, the same month their sister Eunice Kennedy Shriver died.

Smith, who married Kennedy family financial adviser and future White House chief of staff Stephen Edward Smith in 1956, was viewed for much of her life as a quiet sister who shunned the spotlight. In her memoir "The Nine of Us," published in 2016, she wrote that for much of the time her childhood seemed "unexceptional."

"It is hard for me to fully comprehend that I was growing up with brothers who eventually occupy the highest offices of our nation, including president of the United States," she explained. "At the time, they were simply my playmates. They were the source of my amusement and the objects of my admiration."

Though she never ran for office, she campaigned for her brothers, traveling the country for then-Sen. John F. Kennedy as he sought the presidency in 1960. In 1963, she stepped in for a traveling Jacqueline Kennedy and co-hosted a state dinner for Ireland's president. The same year, she accompanied her brother — the first Irish Catholic president — on his famous visit to Ireland. Their great-grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, was from Dunganstown in County Wexford in southeastern Ireland.

Three decades later, she was appointed ambassador to Ireland by President Bill Clinton, who called her "as Irish as an American can be."

During her confirmation hearing, she recalled the trip with her brother, describing it as "one of the most moving experiences of my own life."

As ambassador, she played a role in the Northern Ireland peace process. She helped persuade Clinton to grant a controversial visa in 1994 to Gerry Adams, chief of the Irish Republican Army-linked Sinn Fein party. The move defied the British government, which branded Adams as a terrorist.

Patrick Kennedy highlighted her role in the Irish peace process as the crux of her "enormous legacy."

"She knew it was crucial to bring everybody in in order for there to be lasting peace," Patrick Kennedy told the AP. "She took an enormous risk to her own reputation and stature as an ambassador."

She later called criticism of her actions toward the IRA "unfortunate" and said she thought history would credit the Clinton administration with helping the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern said in 1998 that "it is not an understatement to say that if (the visa for Adams) didn't happen at the time, perhaps other events may not have fallen into place."



In this Nov. 22, 2013 file photo, An unidentified girl, left, holds a rose during a wreath laying ceremony with former Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy Smith, center, and Patrick Hallinan, executive director of Army National Military Cemeteries, at the grave of John F. Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery, in Arlington, Va. Jean Kennedy Smith, the youngest sister and last surviving sibling of President John F. Kennedy, died at 92, her daughter confirmed to The New York Times, Wednesday, June 17, 2020. (AP/Jacquelyn Martin)

In 1996, though, Smith had been reprimanded by Secretary of State Warren Christopher for punishing two of her officers who objected to the visa for Adams.

In December 1998, Smith again risked controversy by taking communion in a Protestant cathedral in Dublin, going against the bishops of her Roman Catholic church.

Her decision was a strong personal gesture of support for Irish President Mary McAleese, a fellow Catholic who had been criticized by Irish bishops for joining in the Protestant communion service.

"Religion, after all, is about bringing people together," Smith told The Irish Times. "We all have our own way of going to God."

Patrick Kennedy, recalled his aunt's popularity, accessibility and constant travel around Ireland when he visited there with a delegation of Irish Americans from his state of Rhode Island. The post, he said, allowed her to tap into her political side.

"It was like, all of the hidden, or pent-up desire to be a politician, which, of course ran through her as with every one of her siblings, she got to live that out," he said.

When she stepped down as ambassador in 1998, she received Irish citizenship for "distinguished service to the nation."

Diplomacy, along with politics, also ran in the Kennedy family. Her father was ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1938 to 1940. Niece Caroline Kennedy served as ambassador to Japan during the Obama administration.

"We're the first father-daughter ambassadors," Smith told The Irish Times in 1997. "So I can't remember a time when we were not an actively political family."

In 1974, Smith founded Very Special Arts, an education program that supports artists with physical or mental disabilities. Her 1993 book with George Plimpton, "Chronicles of Courage: Very Special Artists," features interviews with disabled artists. The program followed in the footsteps of her sister Eunice's creation of the Special Olympics for disabled athletes.

Smith and her husband had four children, Stephen Jr., William, Amanda and Kym. Her husband died in 1990.

Her son, Dr. William Kennedy Smith, made headlines in 1991, when he was charged with rape at the Kennedy estate in Palm Beach, Florida. He was acquitted after a highly publicized trial that included testimony from his uncle, Sen. Edward Kennedy, who had roused his nephew and son to go to some nightclubs that Easter weekend.

Among Smith's other siblings, Rosemary died in 2005; and Patricia in 2006.

"Certainly a distinct characteristic of our family was its size," Smith wrote in her memoir. "A child in a big family constantly feels surrounded and supported. For me, there was always someone to play with or someone to talk to just around the corner, out on the porch, or in the next bedroom. I never felt alone."

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