News

A brown-haired older white woman sits between two older white men. All wear formal clothes

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, left, along with his wife Rosalynn Carter, center, and John Hardman, executive director of The Carter Center in Atlanta, listen to participants speak at the center during a "Finding Democracy in the Americas" summit March 17, 2003. Mrs. Carter died Nov. 19, 2023, at age 96. (OSV news photo/Tami Chappell, Reuters)

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Former first lady Rosalynn Carter passed away Nov. 19 at her home in Plains, Georgia, according to a statement from The Carter Center.

The statement added the former first lady died peacefully, with family by her side. She was 96.

Rosalynn Carter was married for 77 years to Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States, who is now 99 years old. The statement described her as "a passionate champion of mental health, caregiving, and women's rights."

In a statement, the former president said, "Rosalynn was my equal partner in everything I ever accomplished."

"She gave me wise guidance and encouragement when I needed it," Carter said. "As long as Rosalynn was in the world, I always knew somebody loved and supported me."

Rosalynn Carter was a key surrogate in Jimmy Carter's political campaigns and an advocate for mental health programs.

Noteworthy aspects of her tenure as first lady include becoming the first woman to hold that position to take up her own active office in the East Wing of the White House. The Carters also were the first presidential couple to welcome a pope to the White House when St. John Paul II visited them there on Oct. 6, 1979.

In addition to her husband, Rosalynn Carter is survived by her children Jack, Chip, Jeff and Amy, 11 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren. She is predeceased by another grandson, Jeremy Carter, who died in 2015.

Chip Carter, her son, said in a statement, "Besides being a loving mother and extraordinary First Lady, my mother was a great humanitarian in her own right."

"Her life of service and compassion was an example for all Americans," he said. "She will be sorely missed not only by our family but by the many people who have better mental health care and access to resources for caregiving today."

Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, where the Carters were active members, shared in a social media post their "deep grief at the loss of our dear friend and fellow congregant."

"As a member of Maranatha, Mrs. Carter has selflessly served her congregation and her community as a Sunday School teacher, a deacon, and the founder of the church's food ministry, a monthly food distribution that now includes volunteers from across the community serving thousands of pounds of food to hundreds of local families on the third Saturday of each month," the church posted to Facebook. "Although she is no longer present with us on this earth, we rejoice in knowing that her fellowship is now in Heaven with her Savior and Friend, our Redeemer, Jesus."

The post also quoted John 16:22: "So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

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The Carters were devout Baptists and participated in programs including Habitat for Humanity following their time in the White House.

"Mrs. Carter has helped change the lives of thousands of homeowners, empowered countless women and inspired millions of people. Over the years, she has blessed us with her compassion for serving others and commitment to improving housing conditions," Jonathan Reckford, Habitat for Humanity International's CEO, said in a statement. "The Carters lent a hand to Habitat for Humanity as a young, (fledgling) organization and created global awareness of our work and of our mission. We are grateful for the incredible impact she and President Carter have had on Habitat and on the families who have benefited from their shining example."

Archbishop Gregory J. Hartmayer of Atlanta wrote a letter of condolence to Jimmy Carter citing I Corinthians 13:4-7, and adding, "I cannot find a better description of the love that you and the First Lady shared in your marriage of over seventy-seven years. Your love for one another, in good times, as well as difficult ones, is a testimony to your faith in God and one another!"

Hartmayer added that he remembers with fondness visiting the Carters' church, and when they in return came to a Mass he celebrated and he will remember their family in prayer during a visit to Assisi to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the approval of the Rule of St. Francis.

"Please be assured of my prayers as you mourn the death and celebrate the life of your beloved Rosalynn," he wrote in the letter, which was shared with OSV News. "In the Funeral Liturgy, we are reminded that our good deeds go with us. This is especially true for Mrs. Carter. May the Father of Mercies and the God of Consolation receive her into his loving embrace and reward her for her loving and faithful service."

President Joe Biden, who is Catholic, and first lady Jill Biden, noted that same record of service and also the role of faith in Rosalynn Carter's life in a statement offering condolences for the Carter family.

"First Lady Rosalynn Carter walked her own path, inspiring a nation and the world along the way," the Bidens said. "Throughout her incredible life as First Lady of

Georgia and the First Lady of the United States, Rosalynn did so much to address many of society's greatest needs. She was a champion for equal rights and opportunities for women and girls; an advocate for mental health and wellness for every person; and a supporter of the often unseen and uncompensated caregivers of our children, aging loved ones, and people with disabilities."

They added that "above all, the deep love shared between Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter is the definition of partnership, and their humble leadership is the definition of patriotism."

"She lived her life by her faith," the Bidens said. "Time and time again, during the more than four decades of our friendship -- through rigors of campaigns, through the darkness of deep and profound loss -- we always felt the hope, warmth, and optimism of Rosalynn Carter. She will always be in our hearts. On behalf of a grateful nation, we send our love to President Carter, the entire Carter family, and the countless people across our nation and the world whose lives are better, fuller, and brighter because of the life and legacy of Rosalynn Carter. May God bless our dear friend. May God bless a great American."

President Biden told reporters Nov. 19 at the Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, that the Carters are "really an incredible family because they brought so much grace to the office."

"He had just great integrity. He still does. And she did, too," Biden said, also noting their long marriage.

Ceremonies honoring the life of Rosalynn Carter take place Nov. 27 through Nov. 29, in Atlanta and Sumter County, Georgia, The Carter Center said. Members of the public are invited to pay their respects at the repose at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum.