



ROXCY O'NEAL BOLTON

JUN 3, 1926 - MAY 17, 2017



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Roxcy O'Neal Bolton, the founding mother of Florida's modern feminist movement and a rambunctious, feather-ruffling presence on its civic and political landscape, died Wednesday in the city she championed and challenged for almost five decades. She was 90.

She died at Doctors Hospital in Coral Gables at 5:10 a.m., her son David said, in the same place where her children were born and where her second husband, David Bolton Sr., died. She had been sick for several years and hadn't been able to eat much since August.

"She was a fighter to the end. Her body wore out. I can't believe she hung on this long."

But that was Roxcy.

Bolton will be buried in the historic City of Miami Cemetery near the grave of Miami's founding mother, Julia Tuttle. Her epitaph will be simple: Her name, the dates of her birth and death, and one other word: Woman.

It is not enough.

Bolton was intensely proud of her cotton-and corn-belt Southern roots and liked to describe herself as "an old-fashioned country woman." She didn't use a computer and never waded into the social media ocean.

But she also was a highly sophisticated, media-savvy player and manipulator, a combination that made her unusually effective in championing the issues that clawed at her heart: children, equal rights, rape prevention and treatment, the poor, the abused, the elderly, the homeless.

More often than not, she proved her assertion that "No matter what anyone tells you, one person can make a difference."

"Our community and our country are better for her tireless advocacy," Coral Gables City Manager Cathy Swanson-Rivenbark said Wednesday morning.

No cause was too large — or small — to merit the high beam of her attention. And neither ridicule nor threats deterred her.

"She was an inveterate fighter for human rights, for women's rights, for African-Americans, for gays, for the dispossessed. She was a good check on city government for all the years, making sure



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that people did the right thing from her point of view,” said former Coral Gables Mayor Jim Cason. “She was just a scrapper and a fighter through her whole life. She was refreshing, a terror in her time, and every community needs someone like a Roxcy Bolton to push back and make sure people are doing the right thing.”

When it wasn't fashionable to take on her causes she never shied away from controversy — and she got results. “She pioneer at a time when there was segregation here,” Cason added. “She was like a pitbull. Once she sank her teeth into a cause she never let it go until she got it.”

For instance, in November 1971, the Playboy Plaza Hotel in Miami Beach bungled when it placed Bolton on its mailing list and offered its facilities, should she desire, for National Organization for Women (NOW) meetings. Bolton was not about to dine in Hefner's hutch and, from an antique desk in her Coral Gables home, she fired off a missive.

“Your colossal gall is exceeded only by my tolerance, despite the stress on my good nature,” she opened her letter to the club's assistant director for sales. For Bolton, Playboy clubs represented the exploitation of women. “How would you like to walk around with a wad of cotton on your rear end?” she wrote.

Bolton's name was removed from the Playboy Club's mailing list.

From Playboy to politics, as an early local leader of NOW, Bolton was instrumental in recruiting then-Sen. Birch Bayh of Indiana to introduce in Congress the ultimately doomed Equal Rights Amendment.

She also initiated the push to have Aug. 26 designated National Women's Equality Day, and helped National Airlines flight attendants fight for a contract to create maternity leave instead of firing its pregnant flight attendants, which had been the airline's policy.

“She's probably the best known feminist women's activist here in Miami,” Joanne Hyppolite, former chief curator at HistoryMiami, said in a 2012 Miami Herald profile. “There were one or two people you would call and she was ours from the '60s onward. She's been the one really strong voice in our community.”

Bolton also helped established Miami-Dade's Commission on the Status of Women, Crime Watch, and the Women's Park Women in Distress — the first rescue shelter of its kind in Florida. In 1974, she opened the Jackson Memorial Hospital rape treatment center that bears her name. A photograph of Coral Gables activist Roxcy O'Neal Bolton, at center, during a circa 1970's march in support of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment. Bolton plans to donate Gables memorabilia, history, to the historical museum in Tallahassee and also has donated to City Hall locally. This was in her home on Wednesday, November 28, 2012.

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A regular at Coral Gables City Hall until months before her death, Bolton held forth on local issues that included the relocation of sidewalk trees and the controversial placement of a Gables



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trolley station in a black neighborhood in Coconut Grove.

Mayors, commissioners, police chiefs and city managers sometimes welcomed — often suffered — her presence.

“They yell at me, ‘Sit down Ms. Bolton!’” she told the Miami Herald for a 2010 story about gadflies in the community. “I’m not a wimp.”

Of course not. Two strokes and two heart attacks robbed her speech of clarity so she powered through by writing out her thoughts in clear black ink on yellow legal pads or even paper plates. When moved to action, she would find her way to a lectern before a city commission, often unaided, catapulted by her determination.

“Roxcy and I had a very interesting relationship,” said former Gables Mayor Don Slesnick. “She was always a person who spoke her mind and spoke vociferously when she expressed herself and would take issue with a number of things the city would do. Since I was in the middle chair as mayor, controlling the meeting, when she decided she wanted to express herself it came down to whether I was going to recognize her.”

It didn’t matter. She spoke.

Nevertheless, the activist and the elected official forged a bond. “She kept government’s feet to the fire about doing the right thing,” Slesnick said. “She was always opinionated but had opinions that were about trying to find the high ground on issues.” Ultimately, “We were supportive of one another and very close.”

Bolton’s death comes less than a week after the passing of “Coral Gables matriarch” Marlene Kerdyk and two weeks after former Wometco chief Arthur Hertz. Both have memorials scheduled on Thursday. “I would say in a week where we are saying ‘goodbye’ to Roxy, Marlene and Art, Coral Gables has lost a generation of people who made a difference,” Slesnick said.

Mother of the park Roxcy O’Neal Bolton greets a crowd that gathered during the dedication ceremony for the new gates and fence sculptures at the Women’s Park in Miami in March 2009.

CHRIS CUTRO For the Miami Herald

Bolton was born in Duck Hill, Mississippi, on June 3, 1926, the daughter of a farmer and his schoolteacher wife who saw only three of their 10 children live past infancy.

Scrappy and unconventional even as a child, she decided at 8 that she wanted to be in Congress: “Sometimes on the way to school the bridges would be washed out,” she said. “I wanted to be a congressman so I could build bridges.”

At 10, she bore witness to an event that would forever change her life, her son David Bolton said. In April 1937, two black men were lynched in Duck Hill. The small town held no more than 500 people. “The whole town attended the lynching,” Bolton said. “That may have been the catalyst for a lot of the things Roxcy did in the future. That affected her.”

She settled in Miami after high school, did office work, joined the Young Democrats, married,



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had a son, and divorced her first husband after five years.

A card-carrying Daughter of the Confederacy, she always kept roots in the soil.

In 1974, Bolton and her second husband, lawyer David Bolton, bought Rockledge, an 18th century, 100-acre farm outside St. Albans, Vermont, where Roxcy dressed in denim, tilled a vegetable garden, and cooked on a cast-iron stove.

Although Bolton always claimed that dialogue was her preferred tool for change, she sometimes interpreted the term loosely, employing heated confrontation if more mannerly conversation failed. In 1971, she led 100 businesswomen, political leaders, activists, housewives and a few men through the streets of downtown Miami to the courthouse in what was probably the country's first "march against rape."

Ridiculing Bolton for the effort, former Herald columnist Jack Kofoed wrote: "If the dolls would face facts, and not live on a diet of silly ideas, including burning bras and drinking in men's bars, they'd get a lot further."

The next year, she packed a picnic hamper, shouldered a bed roll and with six other women took over the office of Henry King Stanford, then president of the University of Miami, to present a long list of demands, including that the school promote more women to department-head positions and pay equal salaries to men and women doing the same jobs.

"She banged down the doors and lots of people like me walked in," said historian Arva Moore Parks, who credited Bolton with making it possible for her to become a UM trustee and Orange Bowl Committee member. "Her activism was what was necessary...even though some people didn't appreciate it."

With one ear glued to the telephone ("Tell him Roxcy Bolton's calling; it's an emergency!") in her kitchen "command post," she summoned a parade of weary, wary public officials and corporate bigwigs from conferences, meetings and, in at least one case, the shower, to plead for everything from better treatment for Haitian detainees and their children at the Krome Service Processing Center and women's admission to the country's military academies to legal backing for Miami mothers who wished to nurse their babies in public.

"You have to dare to be bold," Bolton often said. "Women sometimes will talk about a problem, agonize about it too much. You've got to go out and, like the Marines, hit the beaches. You can't just hang around. You've got to move."

When the executives of downtown Miami's two leading department stores, Burdines and Jordan Marsh, initially resisted her plan to open their men-only luncheon rooms to women, Bolton argued with laser intensity logic: "But men and women sleep together. Why can't they eat together?"

When the male meteorologists running the National Hurricane Center balked at her plea to stop naming tropical storms after women, she suggested honoring U.S. senators (Goldwater



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Annihilates Florida)and the point was finally made.

Women “deeply resent being arbitrarily associated with disaster,” she said.

But not everything went her way.

Bolton split with NOW in 1976 over the creation of a lesbian caucus and what she saw as a rejection of motherhood. “Some of the liberated women are all balled up. They forget their responsibilities to family and children,” she said in a May 1977 cover story in *Tropic*, the Miami Herald’s former Sunday magazine. “I believe you accept new roles, but you don’t abandon the old ones. Our children are tomorrow’s world.”

When we took our marriage vows, I promised to love and honor, but I had ‘obey’ stricken. I’ve been a loving, loyal, faithful wife. I have not been obedient.

Roxcy Bolton in a May 1977 Miami Herald *Tropic* magazine feature about her marriage to David Bolton in 1960.

As time passed, and philosophies and tempers mellowed, Bolton came to be regarded in the public arena with a deference that often had eluded her early on.

She’d invite political leaders and city officials, former foes and friends, alike, along with reporters into her Gables home and insist they leave with a keepsake: a pumpkin pie filling, jams or a favorite old news clipping or magazine with President Kennedy on its cover because it meant something to her.

Jeannett Slesnick, a recent candidate for Coral Gables mayor, visited often. “Roxcy was the one who encouraged me to run for mayor 20 years ago instead of Don. She was disappointed I ran for commission instead. She was one heck of a woman,” she said. “Not everyone agreed with Roxcy but she sure got your attention and stood up for what was right in our community. She was not always easy to love but we sure are going to miss her in Coral Gables.”

On Thursday, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen will address the House “on the unsinkable Roxcy Bolton. She was such a force for good,” she said.

“It’s a different ball game,” Bolton once reminisced. “Most people at least realize women have a right to be in the parlor and not always in the kitchen and the bedroom.”

Roxcy Bolton, right, at the Rape Treatment Center named for her after she fought for its creation in the 1970s. Miami Herald File

In 1984, Bolton was inducted into the Florida Women’s Hall of Fame. In 1988 she won The Herald’s Spirit of Excellence Award. More recently, in 2014 the National Women’s History Project celebrated Bolton in Washington, D.C., as one of the 2014 National Women’s History Month Honorees. Later that year, she was honored by the Miami Woman’s Club for being a “Leading Force of the Women’s Rights Movement in Miami.”

And, in March 2015, Miami-Dade Parks and Recreation honored Bolton as a trailblazer during its 27th annual In the Company of Women Awards Ceremony.



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After a stroke in 1998, Bolton announced that her “work for womankind is over. I don’t plan to climb any more mountains.” Of course, she did anyway. “If it were a dire circumstance, maybe I could rise to the occasion. Maybe. But for sure, I did it my way.”

Bolton is survived by daughter Bonnie Dee Bolton, and her sons David Bolton Jr., and Baron “Buddy” Bolton. She was predeceased by husband David Bolton and her son Randall Hart. A service will be held 10 a.m. Saturday at Van Orsdel Coral Gables Chapel, 4600 SW Eighth St. Donations may be made to The Women's Park, Roxcy Bolton Memorial Fund, 10251 W. Flagler St. Call 305-480-1717 for more information about the park.

Howard Cohen: 305-376-3619, @HowardCohen



Events

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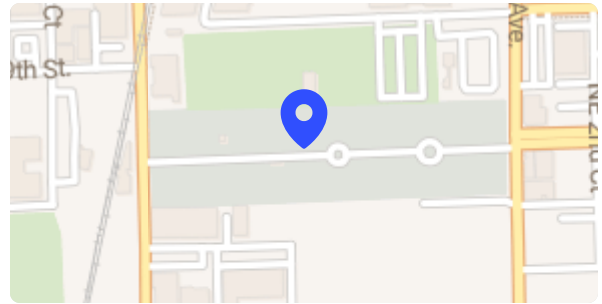
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Cemetery Details



City of Miami Cemetery

1800 NE 2nd Ave., Miami FL 33132





Tribute Wall

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Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services shared a **Tribute Video**.

May 19 at 7:18 AM



Anonymous sent a Sentiments of Serenity Spray to the BOLTON family.

May 19 at 9:48 AM



From Neighbors Rosa & Orlando sent a Sentiments of Serenity Spray to the BOLTON family.

May 19 at 9:39 AM



Anonymous sent a Beautiful in Blue to the BOLTON family.

May 19 at 9:36 AM



Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services shared an album called **LifeTributes**.

May 18 at 7:05 AM



Anonymous sent a Sweet Solace Spray to the BOLTON family.

May 18 at 7:05 AM





Media

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Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services shared a **Tribute Video**.

May 19 at 7:18 AM





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Van Orsdel Funeral & Cremation Services shared 20 photos to the LifeTributes album.

May 19 at 4:35 AM





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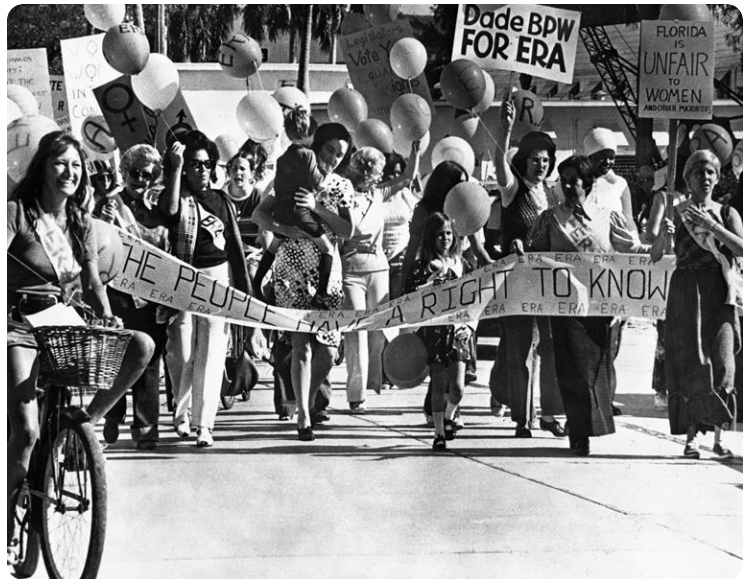




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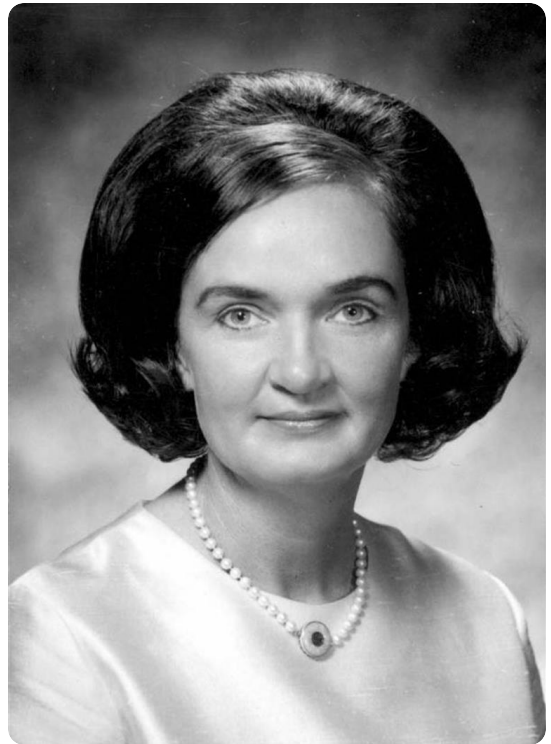




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