

A tribute to Carol Blum

June 4, 2021

Eight years ago today, friend and colleague Carol Blum died after a long fight with cancer.

I had the privilege to be with her and mutual friend Carole Shields when she died. In an effort to keep Carol's memory alive, I'm re-sharing a tribute we wrote for an informal memorial gathering:

Early on the morning of June 4, 2013, Carol Blum died at home in her sleep, ending a life that focused on purposeful work and activism, lasting friendships with people and cats, a love of good food and wine, and the pleasures of high and low culture – from Broadway to Las Vegas, New York cabaret to American Idol and The Voice.

Carol was fiercely loyal to the causes and people that were important to her, and that loyalty was returned. Throughout her long and tenacious struggle with cancer, Carol was buoyed by the in-person and long-distance support of many people who cared about her. In the company of friends and her devoted cat Alex, Carol died knowing that she was deeply loved.

Carol was born in Texas, spent a good portion of her childhood in the Bahamas, and went to high school and college in Florida. She spent most of her adult life working in Washington, D.C. and living in Alexandria, Virginia, in a home she shared for some time with her late former partner Cindy Marano. Carol stopped working and returned to Florida in 2008 to focus on fighting her aggressive recurrent cancer.

Carol was a lifelong advocate for women's rights and other progressive causes. In the 1970s, she did press work and managed volunteers in campaigns for the state Democratic Party. She was also president of Broward County National Organization for Women. Her friend Rebecca Berg, who at the time was President of Florida NOW, remembers that "she demanded the best from us and it made all of us stronger and wiser."

Carol came to Washington in 1977 as press secretary for the National Organization for Women. She developed public education campaigns on the Equal Rights Amendment (including national ERA marches in 1977 and 1979), reproductive rights, and other projects such as NOW's response to Anita Bryant's infamous campaign to repeal an anti-discrimination ordinance in Dade County, Florida.

Carol was an early supporter of NOW's work on LGBT & minority issues, including the first NOW Minority Women's Conference in 1978 and the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1979. She was a delegate and NOW coordinator at the 1978 International Women's Conference in Houston and lobbied on behalf of the ERA and reproductive rights at the Democratic Party's "mini-convention" in 1978. In 1981 and 1982, she was a program manager and public relations coordinator for the National Cambodia Crisis Committee, bringing together activists and celebrities to promote the needs of refugees and to bring in major donors to the cause of alleviating famine and starvation.

From 1982 to 1984 she was project and communications director of the Project of Equal Education Rights of the NOW Legal Defense Fund, where she led program and communications work related to the implementation of Title IX.

From 1984 to 1987 she was the senior program manager at The National Displaced Homemakers Network, where she coordinated programs and communications among 400 community-based organizations serving women in transition. She built the grassroots network of program providers nationwide, reaching into all 50 states.

In 1987 she joined People For the American Way as Deputy Communications Director. For the next 21 years, under five PFAW presidents, Carol helped lead the organization as Communications Director, Chief of Staff, and ultimately as Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.

Carol thought of herself as a problem-solver for the organization. She played a crucial behind-the-scenes role in developing strategic plans; recruiting, supporting, and developing talented staff; assisting the integration of new program work; and helping staff and board members figure out how to make things happen. She encouraged good ideas and stepped in when needed to squelch bad ones. She also, it must be noted, took great pleasure in crushing her colleagues in the NFL pool.

Carol had a hand in planning and promoting major fundraising events and in managing relationships with celebrities who took part in them. She was passionate about music and the role of the arts in making social change and she ensured that major PFAW events featured spectacular performances.

Carol had a get-things-done approach to work and life, as well as a warm and generous personal spirit. She demonstrated both those traits throughout her career and her fight against cancer. She never gave in – to sexism, homophobia, the Religious Right, or the disease. She will be remembered as friend and role model for her commitment and courage.

May her memory inspire us to work hard and live well.