

Jan Meyers, a Kansas Republican 'First' in Congress, Dies at 90

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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Jan Meyers, the first Republican woman elected to the United States House of Representatives from Kansas, died on Friday at a hospital in Merriam, Kan. She was 90.

Her daughter, Valerie J. Meyers, said the cause was complications of heart disease.

Ms. Meyers, who was from Overland Park, represented Kansas' Third Congressional District, an area in the eastern part of the state that included Kansas City, from 1985 to 1997.

Ms. Meyers was unusual among Kansas Republicans in that she supported abortion rights and gun control.

"She was a pioneer," Mike Murray, her former chief of staff and campaign manager, told The Kansas City Star. "She was way ahead of today's movement for women in politics."

While moderate on social issues, she was a staunch fiscal conservative and frequently voted to cut the federal deficit.

Her stint in Congress included two years as chairwoman of the House Small Business Committee. It was the first time that a Republican woman had chaired a House committee since Edith Nourse Rogers, from Massachusetts, headed Veterans' Affairs from 1953 to 1955, according to Ms. Meyers's official House biography.

After she left Congress, Ms. Meyers reflected on her career and the fact that she sometimes voted against her party.

"Listen to your conscience and your constituents — both," she told the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call in 2001. "Most of the time they'll agree. If your conscience is different than your constituents', then you'll have a hard time."

Janice Lenore Crilly was born on July 20, 1928, in Lincoln, Neb., the daughter of Howard M. Crilly and Lenore N. (Hazel) Crilly. She grew up in Superior, Neb., where her father ran the local newspaper, The Superior Express.

She graduated with an associate fine arts degree from William Woods College (now William Woods University) in Fulton, Mo., in 1948 and with a bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Nebraska in 1951. After graduation, she worked in advertising and public relations and

In 1953 married Louis Meyers, who became a Kansas City television station executive. Mr. Meyers, who was known as Dutch, died in 2009.

In addition to her daughter, she is survived by her son, Dr. Philip Meyers; her brother, Dr. Donn Crilly; and a granddaughter. Dr. Meyers ran unsuccessfully for a congressional seat in Hawaii in 2000 as a Republican against Representative Neil Abercrombie.

Ms. Meyers worked on several successful political campaigns for Kansas Republicans — in 1966 for Larry Winn Jr. for the House of Representatives, in 1968 for Bob Dole for the Senate, and in 1974 for Bob Bennett for governor.

Her own career as a public official began in 1967 on the Overland Park City Council. She was its president from 1970 to 1972. She won election to the Kansas State Senate in 1972 and served there for the next 12 years.

In 1978, she ran for the United States Senate but lost the Republican nomination to Nancy Kassebaum, who went on to win the general election.

When Representative Winn retired from the House in 1984, Ms. Meyers ran to succeed him. She won the Republican nomination in a five-way primary but in November faced a formidable opponent in Mayor John Reardon of Kansas City, a Democrat who opposed abortion rights.

Ms. Meyers emphasized her experience in state politics and covered the district with “Jan Can” posters. She also ran on President Ronald Reagan’s platform, calling for strong defense and a balanced-budget amendment. She benefited from running with Reagan and Senator Kassebaum at the top of the ticket and trounced her opponent.

While Ms. Meyers was the first Republican woman sent by Kansas to the House, the first Democratic woman from the state elected to the chamber was Kathryn O’Loughlin McCarthy, who served one term, from 1933 to 1935.

When Republicans won control of the House in 1994 for the first time in 40 years, Ms. Meyers was named chairwoman of the Small Business Committee, where she advocated lower taxes and less regulation on small businesses.

Among her proudest accomplishments, her daughter said in a telephone interview, was playing a part with senators Dole and Kassebaum in the yearslong effort to establish the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in east-central Kansas.

Ms. Meyers declined to run for re-election in 1996. “There are other things in life I want to do, and being a member of Congress, if you take the job seriously, simply does not leave time,” she said.

She also said that House members should serve no more than 10 to 14 years. She returned to Overland Park, where she joined foundation boards for a local library and a community college.

Correction: June 26, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary erroneously credited Ms. Meyers with a distinction. She was the first Republican woman from Kansas elected to the United States House of Representatives, not to Congress. As the obituary notes, Nancy Kassebaum was the first, when she was elected to the Senate.

A version of this article appears in print on June 26, 2019, on Page B15 of the New York edition with the headline: Jan Meyers, 90, Supporter Of Abortion and Austerity