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In Memoriam

The Great Political Journalist, Cokie Roberts

By George Zaragoza



Cokie Roberts at the Kennedy Center in 1998, Courtesy Wikimedia Commons¹

Cokie Roberts will be remembered through her achievements as a political broadcaster and compassionate human being. Roberts was raised by her mother, Lindy Boggs, and father, Hale Boggs, who were both very well-known politicians. This early exposure

¹ Photograph by John Matthew Smith distributed under a CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

provided Roberts the opportunity to learn about the world of politics at a young age. One of the most influential female political journalists of her era, Roberts left behind many great memories that can inspire women to break barriers in the world of broadcasting. Furthermore, Roberts is the recipient of three Emmy Awards, as well as the author of several books, and is a role model to many people who followed her career.

Roberts built many friendships throughout her career and her death impacted many in the profession of journalism; one of these established broadcasters that remembers Cokie Roberts is Nina Totenberg. Totenberg reveals that Roberts' friendship and her death impacted thousands of people throughout the world.² Roberts was also involved in Save the Children, an organization that helps children escape harmful situations, as well as places them in a safer environment that provides education and healthcare. This is the kind of person Roberts was in her professional career and outside of it, she was a compassionate woman who embraced others. This piece is dedicated to Cokie Roberts and will remember her family, career, and role in charity in order to understand her remarkable legacy.

Family

Mary Martha Corrine Morrison Claiborne "Cokie" Roberts, was born in 1943 in New Orleans, Louisiana, and passed away in 2019 at the age of 75.³ Roberts was a pioneer in the field of political journalism and created opportunities for women to be accepted and respected as journalists. In addition, Roberts used the role models

² Nina Totenberg, "'The Personification of Human Decency': Nina Totenberg Remembers Cokie Roberts," *NPR* (Sept 2019): <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/17/761597458/the-personification-of-human-decency-nina-totenberg-remembers-cokie-roberts>.

³ Bobby Allyn and Scott Neuman, "Cokie Roberts, Pioneering Journalist Who Helped Shape NPR, dies at 75," *NPR* (Sept 2019), <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/17/761050916/cokie-roberts-pioneering-female-journalist-who-helped-shape-npr-dies-at-75>.

before her time to learn about politics. Cokie Roberts stated that when she was a child, she would hear stories about her ancestor, William Claiborne, who, in 1790, started working for Congress and earned a seat at the age of twenty-three. A couple years below the minimum age requirement of twenty-five, he was recognized for being involved in the electoral tie breaker between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.⁴ As a child, she would hear stories about the Founding Fathers and Betsy Ross, but noticed women were not widely recognized in politics.⁵ According to Roberts, as a kid, she wondered about the women before her time in politics that had relationships with William Claiborne.⁶ She was realizing that women had a difficult time being recognized and earning a position that impacted the world of politics and reporting without the presence of a man.

Lindy Boggs was a prominent name associated with the Democratic political party from Louisiana. Boggs arrived in Washington in 1941, at the age of twenty-four, married at that time to the youngest member of the House of Representatives.⁷ This sheds light on the importance of women establishing themselves in the world of politics. In other words, her name was recognized because of the status of her husband. This is an example of the prejudice women had to overcome and are still challenged with today. Lindy Boggs used her charisma to assist Hale Boggs become a U.S majority leader in politics through her political knowledge.⁸ Lindy Boggs passed away at the age of 97 years old.⁹ The importance of this is that Cokie Roberts had first-hand

⁴ Cokie Roberts, "Introduction," In *Founding Mothers: The Women who Raised our Nation*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), xv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁷ Stephanie Hanes, "Lindy Boggs Dies; Congresswoman and Democratic Leader," *The Washington Post* (July 2013): https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/lindy-boggs-congresswoman-and-democratic-leader-dies-at-97/2013/07/27/02f452ae-f6c8-11e2-aa2e-4088616498b4_story.html.

⁸ Hanes, "Lindy Boggs Dies."

⁹ *Ibid.*

experience of the influence women had in politics and broadcasting from her mother's career, which helped prepare her for the challenges ahead. Cokie Roberts confirmed the death of Lindy Boggs, the powerful achievements both have made as women in politics is undeniable.

Roberts capitalized on the knowledge gained from strong family ties in the profession of politics, which led to her prominent career with ABC and NPR—presenting a voice the world trusted.¹⁰ In addition, this was at a time in the history of the world of politics, the 1970s, when women's voices were often overshadowed by men when reporting world events. Neil Genzlinger states that only a few women earned a national profile as a reporter because it was dominated by men and Roberts was one of those women who established greatness.¹¹ Moreover, Roberts is an example that women can be productive in the world of journalism alongside men.

Career

Roberts started working for NPR in 1978 and helped the network become more established with her reporting of politics in Washington before she joined ABC News. Cokie Roberts's professionalism and knowledge as a political reporter impacted the networks she was part of throughout her career. Roberts was one of the main voices for NPR and earned the reputation to be called a pioneer in the profession of journalists, among the likes of Nina Totenberg, as well as a handful of others. Furthermore, Roberts demonstrated a great work ethic as well as the charisma to maintain an important status that placed her among great women. Roberts joined the ranks of great women journalists who established an excellent legacy and played important roles in journalism.

¹⁰ Neil Genzlinger, "Cokie Roberts Dies; Veteran Broadcast Journalist Was 75," *The New York Times* (Sept. 2019):

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/obituaries/cokie-roberts-dead.html>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Roberts' career with ABC News began in 1988 and she was an established part-time political reporter with NPR during that period. Furthermore, in 1988, when Roberts began working for ABC News there were more women at broadcast networks as well as newspapers.¹² This is important because women were now being heard more often and were well-represented in the field of broadcasting. This brings forth Roberts' role as a female journalist because, with the competitiveness from both genders, she became a well-known name in mass media and books. Roberts' work ethic earned her a spot into the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame; not every broadcast journalist earns this honor. Roberts was selected into the Broadcasting and Cable Hall of Fame and was praised by the Library of Congress who, in 2008, gave her the title of "Living Legend."¹³ This sheds light on the reputation Roberts maintained throughout her career and after, being embraced by thousands of people for her ethical practices throughout the years in broadcasting as well as political journalism.

Roberts cared deeply about her work and even when ill remained informed and involved in her profession. Roberts delivered speeches and made appearances on television and the radio during this period, as well.¹⁴ At this time, Roberts was ill from breast cancer, yet she was able to reach others through her ability to continue to produce her information for the public. Roberts is the author of several books about women that were not recognized in American political history, one of these includes *Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised Our Nation*, about the female relatives of the Founding Fathers. The last book Roberts

¹² Bobby Allyn and Scott Neuman, "Cokie Roberts, Pioneering Journalist Who Helped Shape NPR, dies at 75," *NPR* (Sept, 2019) <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/17/761050916/cokie-roberts-pioneering-female-journalist-who-helped-shape-npr-dies-at-75>.

¹³ Harrison Smith, "Cokie Roberts, Emmy-Winning Journalist and Political Commentator, Dies at 75," *The Press Democrat* (2019) <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/news/10058028-181/cokie-roberts-emmy-winning-journalist-and?sba=AAS>.

¹⁴ Nina Totenberg, "'The Personification of Human Decency': Nina Totenberg Remembers Cokie Roberts," *NPR* (2019).

published was in 2015, titled *Capital Dames: The Civil War and the Women of Washington, 1848-1868*. Peter Szekely noted that Roberts usually pointed out that women played an important role in civilizing society.¹⁵

Charity

Roberts took time outside of her professional career to get involved with Save the Children, a charity organization which focuses on investing into children's futures. Roberts remained humble even though helping children without resources is a huge deal. Roberts practiced kindness, she did not seek recognition, whether it was for working with Save the Children or other ways she shared kindness, she did so without thinking her actions were exceptional.¹⁶ This sheds light on how Roberts was able to connect with important organizations such as Save the Children to change lives for the better.

In conclusion, Cokie Roberts established a legacy that has created opportunities for women in the world of broadcasting and journalism. Furthermore, she will be remembered for her contributions outside of her work for helping children through charity. The family of Roberts influenced her from a young age towards the profession of political broadcasting. Additionally, Roberts developed excellent skills and became one of the greatest women broadcasters the world knows. The career Roberts had will continue to inspire people for years to come because she had a voice that always challenged bias towards women. She used her voice to demand women's rights and was successful in many ways. Roberts has two adult children as well as six grandchildren that carry on her legacy.

¹⁵ Peter Szekely, "U.S. Journalist Cokie Roberts, a 'Founding Mother' of National Public Radio, dead at 75," *Reuters* (2019): <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-people-cokie-roberts-idUSKBN1W21SN>.

¹⁶ Totenberg, "The Personification of Human Decency."

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Author Bio

George Zaragoza is a first-year graduate student who started education at CSU San Bernardino in 2019, working on achieving a Masters of Arts degree in communication studies. George has established a very good work ethic and remains in good academic standing. After graduation, he plans on continuing education in a Ph.D. program in Communication Studies. Furthermore, in the process, George plans on continuing to focus on research about the prison industrial complex and to continue to be a resource for incarcerated people who challenge the system. George would like to thank the editorial board and Dr. Murray for the opportunity to write an in memoriam piece dedicated to Cokie Roberts.

