

Achsah Nesmith Obituary



Achsah Nesmith, a former journalist who covered the Civil Rights Movement and later became a speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter, died March 5, 2024, after a brief illness. Mrs. Nesmith, who lived in Alexandria, VA, was 84.

One of the first women to be hired as a speechwriter for a U.S. president, she worked for President Jimmy Carter for all four years of his administration. She collaborated with him and Rosalynn Carter on the book *Everything To Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* and also wrote his Nobel speech in 2002. *Rolling Stone* magazine said she was President Carter's favorite scribe.

Mrs. Nesmith prided herself in finding the right words, free of government-speak and cliches, to help the president express himself – in his own words. "It's not that you put these great words in his mouth and he spouts them out like a puppet," she once told a journalist. "Speechwriters are not ventriloquists—they are helpers."

Eudora Achsah Posey was born on Nov. 16, 1939, in Atlanta, Georgia, daughter to Eudora and Frank Posey, a nurse and a storekeeper. She attended Southern Methodist University, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in history in 1961. While at SMU, she worked as a freelancer and talent scout for *Mademoiselle* magazine and was featured in a photo spread on the fashion of college "coeds." After university, she worked for the *Atlanta Constitution*, covering federal courts, the legislature and key moments in the Civil Rights Movement. That's where she met a peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter who was running for governor. She covered his campaign, following him all over the state of Georgia.

She also wrote Martin Luther King's front-page obituary for the *Constitution* and covered several Apollo missions. It was in the *Constitution* parking lot where she met Jeff Nesmith, a journalist who would become her husband of nearly 57 years and with whom she covered those Apollo missions. Mr. Nesmith died last year. Achsah was extraordinarily proud of the day that President-elect Carter's chief of staff called and offered her a job, which she turned down because she said she was busy raising two little children. She recounted how when she told her husband about the call that evening, he insisted that she try to get that chief of staff back on the phone and take that job. She cherished the fact that, at a time when many men would not have considered uprooting their own careers because of their wife's career, Mr. Nesmith insisted on it, telling her "I can raise babies." Their partnership taught their children more than any book could have, and they insisted their children read all the books.

The family moved to Washington in 1977. After the Carter administration ended after one term, Mrs. Nesmith spent several years freelancing and volunteering in their church, the Old Presbyterian Meeting House. She later worked as a speechwriter for Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia and as a writer in the communications office of the United States Agency for International Development.

"Achsah had a quiet and caring but very strong voice, with a depth of knowledge across many areas," said former Sen. Nunn. "She was a talented and wonderful partner for those of us in the arena of public service. I was very proud to be the beneficiary of Achsah's wonderful character, her wisdom and her sound judgment. She was able to read a room on every occasion."

Mrs. Nesmith was proud of her professional accomplishments, but also of the life she and Jeff built together. She always said that the greatest gift she gave her children was choosing the right father for them. Mrs. Nesmith loved to travel, visiting Tanzania in the early 1960s with Crossroads Africa. She and Jeff continued to travel, climbing Machu Pichu in Peru as a young couple, and traveling as a family to Mexico, Greece, Vietnam, Cambodia, and most recently France, a few months before Covid locked down travel.

She also shared Carter's dedication to service and went on several Habitat for Humanity home-building blitzes with the Carters. Mrs. Nesmith also enjoyed the time she volunteered at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, working to establish a bag lunch program for homeless residents of Alexandria. When she called all of the other Alexandria churches and told them that OPMH was going to start a bag lunch program, the other churches told her they didn't think there was sufficient demand for that. So, Mrs. Nesmith and a few friends made the lunches, and when they ran out of meals the first week, she called the other churches back with her evidence of the need. With her push, the other Alexandria churches stepped up. Mrs. Nesmith also worked to secure the funding and political support to open Carpenter's Shelter, which serves the unhoused in Alexandria.

Later in life, Mrs. Nesmith earned a Master of Arts degree in Liberal Studies in 2000 from Georgetown University. She also volunteered to help teach children in City of Alexandria Public Schools to read. In her final years, she became concerned about the disparity that African American mothers faced in health care outcomes. When she was no longer in a position to give her time, she donated to Mamatoto Village, which helps mothers and their babies in Ward 7 of the District of Columbia.

She is survived by her daughter, Susannah Achsah Nesmith (Charles Rabin), of Miami, FL; her son, Hollis Jefferson Nesmith, III, (Tara Ronzetti), of Arlington, VA; her grandchildren, Siena Kaya Nesmith and Dominic Nesmith; and her cherished niece, Debbie Middleton. Arrangements are being handled by Everly-Wheatley Funeral Home in Alexandria. The family is holding a private service. In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations to Mamatoto Village, the Carter Center or the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

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