

Ida G. Ruben, tenacious Maryland legislator, dies at 95

In a 32-year political career, she rose to president pro tem of the state Senate.

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By Bart Barnes

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Ida G. Ruben, a Montgomery County Democrat who served in the Maryland legislature for 32 years and was among the first women to gain influence and power at the State House in Annapolis, died Nov. 1 at a hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. She was 95.

Her son Garry Ruben confirmed the death but said he did not know the immediate cause.

Mrs. Ruben was a former chairwoman of Montgomery County's delegation to the House of Delegates and later a prominent member of the state Senate who became its president pro tem, a largely ceremonial position that made her second-in-command of the chamber.

She was elected in 1974 to fill a House seat vacated by her husband, L. Leonard Ruben, who had resigned to become a Maryland District Court judge.

"There weren't many women in the legislature at the time," she told *The Washington Post* years later, describing the Maryland General Assembly of that era as dominated by a "good old boys network."

As a legislator, she sponsored one of the first domestic violence bills in Maryland, and it became law after abuse victims showed up in Annapolis to tell their stories to lawmakers. She also championed measures aimed at forcing "deadbeat dads," as she called them, to pay child support.

Representing a district that included sections of Silver Spring and Takoma Park, she obtained millions of dollars to support the revitalization of downtown Silver Spring and the Strathmore music center in North Bethesda. She was regarded as sharp-elbowed and tenacious, with a tell-it-like-it-is reputation that won the respect, if not always the affection, of legislative colleagues.

"If she was for something, she was dogged and relentless," Brian E. Frosh (D), a former state senator who later became Maryland's attorney general, told *The Post* in 2007. "I used to say there were two ways of arguing with Ida, and neither one of them worked."

Mrs. Ruben served 12 years in the House of Delegates, then moved to the state Senate, where she served 20 years.

During her years in Annapolis, Mrs. Ruben developed a reputation for bluntness about the causes most important to her.

In the waning minutes of the 1999 legislative session, in a scenario The Post called “as distinctively Ida as the trademark twist of blond hair she wears perched in a bun atop her head,” she interrupted the proceedings with a “shriek” at the Senate president, Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Prince George’s), charged to the front of the chamber and demanded immediate passage of what was described as an “obscure” bill related to pensions for Montgomery County teachers.

It was a breach of etiquette, but it worked. “I was so incensed,” she told The Post. “This bill was being killed behind the scenes, and I finally just lost it. I decided I wasn’t going to be jerked around any more.”

Mrs. Ruben was then vice chair of the powerful Budget and Taxation Committee and chair of a subcommittee on transportation and public safety, but she gave up both positions to become president pro tem.

She held the position through 2007, months after her defeat in the 2006 Democratic primary by Jamie Raskin, an American University law professor who ran as a progressive.

Mrs. Ruben lost in a landslide, taking 33 percent of the vote to Raskin’s 67 percent, in a race marked by charges from her opponent that she was an entrenched but undistinguished “machine politician.”

She, in turn, called him “not even a real Democrat,” noting his work as a lawyer on behalf of “radical pro-life groups that intimidate women and doctors.”

Raskin was elected to Congress in 2016 and was the lead impeachment manager for the second impeachment of President Donald Trump.

In part, Mrs. Ruben blamed her defeat on a Post editorial that said “her effectiveness has waned as she has used her bullying pulpit on too many occasions.”

Ida Fanny Gass was born in Washington on Jan. 7, 1929, and graduated from Roosevelt High School. In 1948 she married Ruben, who was a Circuit Court judge at the time of his retirement. He died in 2007. A son, Michael, died in 2005.

In addition to Garry, survivors include two other sons, Stephen and Scott; a sister; six grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

Mrs. Ruben had long been known as one of her district’s feistiest political leaders.

“At times, she wears her feelings on her sleeve,” state Sen. Robert R. Neall (D-Anne Arundel), who served with Mrs. Ruben on the budget committee, told The Post in 1999. “Sometimes being a good poker player is a good job skill.”

In response to the criticism, Mrs. Ruben said: “That may be true, but I tell the truth. I say what I think. I argue my points. I don’t sneak behind anyone’s back. And I can look at myself in the mirror the next day.”