Lehman: Patricia Matson served as Assistant Press Secretary to First Lady Betty Ford. First Ladies have had different attitudes regarding the relationship with the Press. Bess Truman wanted no relationship with the Press, Edith Roosevelt wanted tightly controlled access, and Eleanor Roosevelt encouraged open access. Where did Mrs. Ford fit into this spectrum and what did she see as a comfortable relationship with the Press?

Matson: On the whole, Betty Ford was relaxed with the media once she started an interview; sometimes nervous before it, but got over it quickly. She had little experience with the press before becoming First Lady and approached the subject positively. Interviewers became individuals to her, and she was able to connect with them on a personal basis. She also hadn’t had negative experiences to impact her outlook.

I’m sure it helped that President Ford’s relationships with the press had always been straightforward. He had become Vice President only eight months earlier, so her time in the public eye had been limited. She became a public figure overnight. She came to this part of public life without negative baggage, and it was a part of why she tended to be relaxed with reporters.

Lehman: You worked in the press office during the Nixon Administration and were on hand for that transition. How was that situation handled by the First Ladies Press Office going from one First Lady to the new First Lady?

Matson: Staffs at the White House are small, especially in a First Lady’s office, so you hit the ground running. Our days started at 7am and ended around 9pm and later, we worked weekends, and you always left with lots undone. Two of us who had served in the Nixon Administration remained on Mrs. Ford’s staff. I stayed as assistant press secretary, and Susan Porter Rose continued as appointments secretary. Some on staff are civil service, in the Social and
Correspondence Offices, and they stayed as well. Mrs. Ford appointed her Social Secretary and Press Secretary.

It seemed fairly seamless to me, and the pace and volume of the work meant we were off and running immediately. All White House jobs come with constant deadlines and pervasive chaos, so transitions occur in moments, not months. Then you’re on to something else.

Lehman: Did you have to participate in any type of application process to stay on in the Ford Administration? Did Mrs. Ford come and talk to you about staying on or what her expectations might be, or what yours might be?

Matson: The pace made it much less formal than that. There were only three of us on her press staff. With hundreds of calls and requests, we had lots of interaction with her. Mrs. Ford got to know us on the job. There had been no time for pre-planning, so each of us concentrated on getting her through that day’s activities and preparing her for the next day’s appearances. Then after several months, I picked up the phone at home on a Saturday morning, and she was at the other end. We chatted a few minutes, then she very sweetly said she would be very pleased if I stayed on the job. It was a nice moment and a thoughtful thing for her to do.

Lehman: Now Mrs. Ford gave her first and only press conference on September 4, 1974 and this was pretty momentous because it was the first formal press conference by a First Lady since Mrs. Eisenhower. So whose decision was it for Mrs. Ford to do this and what was the purpose behind it, what was it hoped would be accomplished?

Matson: The number of requests to speak with Mrs. Ford was extraordinary. The world was focused on the aftermath of the Presidential resignation. President Ford had a country to run; and Mrs. Ford, unknown to the public, was the next natural place to look for stories. An active press corps already followed us on a daily basis; then add international media based in the US and other Washington-based reporters for local newspapers. A large press conference was the only way to be responsive to the volume of requests. In some ways, it was inevitable.
At any rate, Mrs. Ford wanted to be accommodating. She had observed President Ford throughout his career. He was always easy and relaxed with the press, so she had a good role model. He was also the kind of husband who didn’t have a problem with Mrs. Ford expressing her opinion. So she got through the session fairly calmly, then breathed a sigh of relief.

Lehman: Talk about another major event that happened early on in the administration and that was Mrs. Ford’s diagnosis with breast cancer, her mastectomy and her decision to go public with all of that information. How did she approach the press office with her decision to make this public? What was her role in leading the press office in how to get this information out? How did the Newsweek story come about? Let’s just talk about that okay?

Matson: Mrs. Ford had great confidence in her staff to do what needed to be done. She didn’t get involved with staff decisions or hover over people at decision time. She had strong executives, and they did their jobs. In this case, both the East Wing and West Wing were involved, because it was an announcement that very much involved both.

It was a hurried announcement, on the heels of the diagnosis, and it went out as Mrs. Ford was headed to Walter Reed Hospital for the surgery. At the time, she was understandably focused on her health and having the surgery. The iconic photo, taken shortly after the operation, showed her playfully throwing a football to her husband in her hospital room. Think about that. Within days, she had transitioned out of her own private fears and realized the importance of showing the world that life continues after a mastectomy; that it needn’t limit one’s zest for living. Women everywhere who had undergone that surgery must have raised their glasses when they saw that photo.

It’s important to remember that people didn’t openly discuss breast cancer then. Just 40 years ago, it was considered a very personal, intimate disease, with more emphasis on the word ‘breast’ than the significant word ‘cancer.’ Certainly, no woman ever discussed her own mastectomy publicly, not even with close friends. Mrs. Ford’s ease with the public announcement spoke volumes about her courage, her optimism, and her empathy for women everywhere who had faced breast cancer.
It wasn’t long before the impact of her candor and attitude toward her mastectomy was evident. Mrs. Ford realized she had a ‘bully pulpit,’ and she used it instinctively, encouraging women to have regular mammograms. She had been First Lady for about six weeks. She launched the beginning of a new era in understanding and accepting breast cancer; and she emphasized prevention. The statistics on numbers of mammograms prior to her announcement and after were startling. This was the beginning of women incorporating routine mammograms into their annual health exams. The amount of mail we had on that subject was overwhelming. We stopped counting at 50,000 letters, and those arrived at the White House in a very short period of time. And PS, just a year later, the campaign got a second wind when Happy Rockefeller, wife of the vice president, learned that she, too, had the disease and shared it with the public.

Lehman: Sheila Weidenfeld comes on board in November of 1974. What was her approach to the media? She, obviously, came in and took control of the press office and so what was her approach to the media? Did she have a particular philosophy by which she structured that press office or a philosophy by which she approached the press?

Matson: Sheila had a very specific philosophy, unique to the time. Her background as a television producer informed every aspect of how she approached her job. The experience of press secretaries prior to that time had been primarily with print press, because newspapers had been the principal medium of communications. Sheila was the 1974 equivalent of today’s digital, online, “new media” professional. Television was the most immediate and effective way to reach large numbers of people. Mrs. Ford was the first First Lady to become a television presence, as the medium had become ubiquitous and integral to every part of society and politics. Sheila’s experience dovetailed with the rise of television’s impact on the American public.

Lehman: Let’s talk a little bit about the nuts and bolts of working in the press office; some of the structure, the reporting relations, the division of labor…

Matson: For most of the administration, there were three of us in the press office. The first year it was Sheila; myself as the assistant press secretary and
speechwriter; and one person, Nancy Chirdon, as support help. Fran Paris replaced Nancy, when she went to work for Mrs. Ford. I was on a plane most of that first year, as President and Mrs. Ford visited 13 foreign countries. I would accompany the Presidential advance team for a week and return to that location to be on-ground for the week the visit actually happened.

Consequently, I was out of the office most of the time. That first year, it was Sheila and Nancy who handled the enormous volume of calls. Mrs. Ford was someone who Americans identified with, and there was a lot of interest in her and the four offspring. I was in Europe a lot of that first year and away much of the second year doing advance work for domestic visits, some of which involved President Ford’s campaign for re-election. I once tallied my days travelling domestically, and found I’d been home a total of two weeks during the nine months between February and October -- and that was a day here, two days there. I would travel from one stop to a second stop to a third stop, then back to the start point for Mrs. Ford’s visit. The support these trips provided for the press office was critical, but it meant one less person in the office.

Lehman: In her book, Ms. Weidenfeld talks about some tensions between the East Wing and the West Wing; the First Lady’s office and the offices of the President. How did you perceive this situation? Were the presidential staffers cooperative with the East Wing? I don’t want to suggest she said obstructionist, I don’t know if she used that word, but that is sort of the gist; so what was your perception of the situation between East and West Wing?

Matson: I’m told that historically most East and West Wing staffs have tensions. The West Wing supports the President, so it all starts there. Generally, the West Wing has enough on its plate that the East Wing occupies its own universe, meaning decisions involving the First Lady are made by her staff, with coordinating information passed on to the West Wing. Yes, there are second guessers in any political, high-pressure organization, and we had those too. Ultimately, you’re all going in the same direction, so you try to work things out, sometimes more smoothly than others. Individual personal relationships help bridge the gaps.
You talked about covering Mrs. Ford’s trips, being on Mrs. Ford’s trips with her; so I would like you to expand on that and talk about the press office’s role on Mrs. Ford’s travels. Did anything in particular stand out in your mind? Were you on the China trip for instance?

There was a lot of media interest in Mrs. Ford’s role during those 13 foreign trips that first year. The President spent most of his time in formal meetings, and the press looked to the First Lady to provide some “color,” something with human interest, for their stories. The media always hopes there will be an activity representative of the host country to provide visual interest for their readers and viewers.

The China trip comes to mind, because Mrs. Ford made front pages and newscasts around the globe by visiting a dance school for young girls. It resonated with the public, because her interest in dance was real, deep and well known. She discovered dance when she was eight years old, and until she was 21 or 22, she thought of nothing but being a professional dancer. She went to New York when she was 20 years old and was hired to dance for Martha Graham at Carnegie Hall.

The dance school visit in China was a hit. It was December 1975, and only the second official visit of an American President to China. Coverage captured the wife of the President in what was then an unknown part of the world, and it featured not only his attractive wife, but many adorable young girls. It also included some unexpected action. Mrs. Ford was moved to join the children in their dance lesson, and the resulting photos made the visit come alive.

I’m going to digress and talk about Mrs. Ford’s “performance gene.” The gene had 25 or so dormant years, when Mrs. Ford channeled her energy into raising four kids in the suburbs. During that time, she was chief disciplinarian and bottle washer. She went to PTA meetings, taught church school and occasionally did cartwheels for her kids on the front lawn. Like most Midwestern women of her generation, she focused on raising a family and making a home. Yes, as the wife of a long-time Congressman and later Minority Leader, she lived in Washington and was certainly comfortable in
that world. That was prelude to a transition, to a much bigger world. She liked to have a good time, was great with people she met, and was very comfortable “on stage,” as she had found in her early twenties, performing at Carnegie Hall. Maybe it shouldn’t have come as a surprise when she took the stage in China and had a wonderful time, for all the world to see.

Lehman: Well she channeled her theatrical gene into some of the state dinners too, I think, and we have marvelous photos of her dancing and looking like she is really enjoying herself at these. We know that these are sometimes, these state dinners are more diplomatic events than they are evenings of entertainment. But, was there a particular protocol that was followed regarding types of information that was spread to media and members of the press regarding each state dinner? How were reporters chosen to cover the event, what was their role? I know they get to come into the White House; some of them do to cover that. So let’s talk about some of the State Dinners and Mrs. Ford’s flair for really changing the tenor of these events from the Nixon years to the Ford years?

Matson: The atmosphere at State dinners during the Ford years was, of course, a contrast to preceding years. It had been a White House under siege, and that had understandably impacted some State occasions and the social calendar. So it was another era when the Fords began to entertain foreign leaders. The atmosphere was lighter and brighter and involved a greater mix of current entertainers.

It was also less formal. Mrs. Ford wanted guests to have a good time, and she worked to put people at ease from the moment the Head of State and his consort arrived at the White House. They would be escorted upstairs to the personal living room in the family quarters. Mrs. Ford understood that a formal dinner at the White House might be nervous-making for guests, and her natural warmth and empathy for others cut across diplomatic lines. The President was gregarious and at ease as well, so that generally set a tone for the evening. Mrs. Ford thought it was important for Heads of State to enjoy their visits.
Mrs. Ford was also creative. She hired an imaginative social secretary in Nancy Ruwe, and the two immediately decided to focus on American art as centerpieces. She was proud of US artists and wanted to showcase them; she also understood their value as a conversation starter.

The White House was able to open up again. It tried to foster a sense of fun and emphasized building personal rapport. Mrs. Ford helped create a cocoon for people to come, to have a good time, and to go home feeling good about America.

Lehman: And did the press office have a certain protocol in terms of handling these State Dinners; certain types of information that you always had to give out?

Matson: Media coverage of State dinners can be important to the President and to a foreign leader. We provided reporters with a press release that included basic factual information and often speeches or remarks to be given. It’s important as a sign of respect to a foreign leader that dignitaries have their names, titles and other information appear correctly, and there was a basic reference sheet that contained that information. We also facilitated information for reporters covering the speeches. There were many State dinners, sometimes two a week, so a rhythm and routine evolves that is helpful to media, both the US-based reporters and those who cover visiting dignitaries.

Lehman: Please talk about the 60 Minutes interview; this is such a big part of Mrs. Ford’s legacy, to First Lady history, and to the history of women. How did that interview come about and did anyone have an inkling as to the type of questions that Mr. Safer was going to ask during the course of the interview?

Matson: Sheila was an experienced television producer, and she knew many people in the business. The 60 Minutes people had been asking for access to Mrs. Ford for quite a while. Sheila recognized that this would be an encompassing opportunity for the nation to get to know its First Lady. 60 Minutes was the #1 rated television program in America. It had a huge and broad-based following. Sheila thought about it, and waited to schedule it until she thought the timing made sense.
Mrs. Ford had a particularly captivating manner. Her low-key, accessible demeanor was such that people identified with her. She had a very direct, sometimes hesitant way of speaking. She projected a vulnerability that often caused people to be somewhat protective of her. She had been a housewife, and she was very ladylike, almost like the woman next door. I think Sheila believed that these qualities would translate well on live television, and that her (very large) audience would understand the qualities that made Mrs. Ford so special.

She was interviewed by Morley Safer, a seasoned and sophisticated journalist. There is a reason 60 Minutes has had decades of high ratings: they find a way to make their programs interesting -- and promotable. Morley covered a broad range of increasingly controversial subjects, and Mrs. Ford answered the questions in her usual straightforward way. She sidestepped nothing.

In the interview, Mrs. Ford radiated warmth and empathy. She was so low-key in her manner, and so soft-spoken, that most viewers didn’t immediately absorb what she said. She was candid and direct with her opinions, as she would be with a friend; and her opinions were all stated in her kind, understanding voice.

The morning after the interview, all hell broke loose. Her exact words, as quoted in newspapers, were startling to many and outrageous to others. They were also too personal for taste levels at the time. If a person hadn’t seen the interview in person, there was no context, no understanding that her statements were in direct response to specific questions. Without seeing it, many wouldn’t have heard the tone of her answers, or seen her soft demeanor.

As the interview was replayed on television, (and portions of it were re-run frequently!), the reaction began to subside. Her answers made sense once viewers heard the questions. The public also expressed shock about Morley’s question to Mrs. Ford about her daughter Susan: how would she respond if Susan wanted to have an affair? It was 1975, and serious journalists at the time didn’t ask such intimate questions. The reaction from many was, ‘Oh, THAT’S why Mrs. Ford was talking about her daughter’s sex life!’ With
context, viewers subsequently came to understand the kind of person Mrs. Ford was and how much she cared about her daughter.

I won’t try to tell you that the political people were happy with the interview. President Ford was facing a tough primary battle with then-former Governor Ronald Reagan. We needed Reagan’s conservative base, and politicos were among those most unhappy with the interview. The prevailing thought in the West Wing may have been ‘How many votes did it cost us?’

The President himself seemed unfazed. I remember hearing later that some in the West Wing were urging the President to talk with Mrs. Ford about “toning it down.” I was told that he just laughed. “You want her to tone things down?” he said, “then YOU talk to her about toning it down!”

Lehman: Well…just for context I’ll add in here that some of the topics that she did discuss were: abortion, drugs, pre-marital sex, and the ERA.

Matson: Mrs. Ford didn’t try to hide her opinions or positions, saying, for example, that she supported the Supreme Court decision on abortion. One impact of the interview, though, was that it was awkward for Susan, who was 18 at the time. The interview instigated a national discussion of her supposed sex life (laughter), and who can blame her for being upset! What Mrs. Ford was trying to say was ‘Of course you support your daughter in what she chooses to do.’

Hypothetical questions, when answered, can be very troublesome, and ducking them is what most seasoned public figures do. With experience, Mrs. Ford understood the pitfalls and somewhat, but only somewhat, tempered her answers. I admired her for trying to be forthright and going to the heart of the question, which essentially was…do you turn your daughter away? Or do you give her the support she needs.

Lehman: You talked a little bit before about your role traveling on the campaign trail, and I would like to turn to that now…to talk about some of the special demands on the First Lady’s press office during the 1976 campaign. And also, the President’s campaign team sometimes seemed to think that Mrs. Ford was a liability on the campaign trail and sometimes we learned that she
Patricia Matson

was an asset. What did you think at the time and do you believe she was used to greatest effectiveness by the campaign? You can begin by just addressing the campaign in general and move along from there.

Matson: Campaigns are very specific to the state visited and to what the needs are there, as articulated by the local political structure. President Ford had a very close primary contest that year against then-Governor Reagan. With input from the political people, we targeted very specific states to visit and a very particular group of people. In some cases, as in very conservative areas, one can debate whether she was the ideal asset, because we needed to appeal to a very conservative base. On the other hand, we were working to change votes. At any rate, we went where party officials asked that she go; we headlined fundraisers when requested; and we raised crowds where local political operatives requested them.

Your focus is narrower and more specific in a primary. It broadens by the general election, where you work to increase your reach and try to appeal to various affinity groups. But it all starts with the State Party, whose needs vary widely from region to region. The reality of a campaign is exhausting, because you cram in as many stops possible on every trip. If you are going to California and a State Party Chairman needs you in Colorado, you try to stop in the Rockies en route.

As “advance people,” you try to protect a surrogate like Mrs. Ford from being over-scheduled. At the same time, Mrs. Ford was the President’s biggest booster. She wanted people to understand how much she believed in her husband, something you could sense in her speeches. So you combine her willingness and enthusiasm to help with requests from State Party Chairmen and you have an exhausting, fast-moving schedule. You don’t have the luxury of sitting back and contemplating an over-arching strategy: the priority was the needs of state organizations.

In most cases, the advance man, Pete Sorum, and the press liaison, which would be me, arrived in a state, touched base with party officials, and visited three or four venues suggested as possibilities for a Betty Ford event. Ultimately, only a few options would work. We’d decide the details of the
visit and leave a local party volunteer in charge; then on to the next venue or city, to see if a possibility there was practical. We’d end up at the start point for Mrs. Ford’s visit, and coordinate final arrangements with our network of volunteers via phone. This usually meant phone meetings throughout the state until late, and quick and cold room service in between calls.

For the press, we’d need to find transportation from the time the plane landed til it left; we found lodging in a central location; food if there were no breaks in the schedule; and obtained certain technical details and basic information about events. We often provided platforms for local and national photographers and TV crews, who needed clear sight lines to take effective pictures. It was my job to help the media do its job, and that definition was continually changing and expanding. Pete worked with party officials and volunteer assistants to make sure the visit went smoothly and all bases were touched. Then preparation time was up. Mrs. Ford and her travelling press corps would land, and we were off and running. Repeat this routine every week for nine months, and you have the outlines of any national campaign.

Lehman: It was the responsibility of the First Lady’s press office to handle media relations for the children, the presidential children as well so what were some of the pluses and minuses of that job?

Matson: It’s always a plus if you can unexpectedly add value in your job. We enjoyed working with the family. The “kids” were new to this world and sometimes needed guidance going into a situation or an event. We had frequent questions about them and requests for interviews. Luckily, they were willing to listen to suggestions. The oldest son, Michael, was married and a minister in North Carolina. Susan, who lived in the White House, had moved in when she was 16. The middle Ford men, Jack and Stephen, came and went. Jack visited most frequently, and Sheila was able to be helpful to him frequently. Families are part of the mix in the White House, and they’re asked to participate in public events because of the accident of their birth. Some are prepared for it, others not so much. We helped when we could.
Lehman: Could you talk in general about Mrs. Ford’s personality, her relationships with some of the staff and people around the White House, sort of an impish personality?

Matson: Mrs. Ford liked to have a good time, and she had a wonderful sense of humor. So…if you were a secret service agent, you might find her teasing you about your necktie or the girlfriend she imagined you might have. Those of us on her staff saw the same sense of fun. On the campaign, we would end the day by gathering in her room to review all that had happened. I remember a trip to San Antonio, Texas, where she was the guest of honor in the River Parade. Our hosts placed her on top of a beautiful float, like a princess out for a ride on a beautiful day. We asked her how she liked it from her perch, and she said, “You know, you hear the funniest things. There I was, floating down the river waving to people, and I heard someone shout from the side of the riverbank: ‘Mrs. Ford, I don’t like your new haircut!’” Mrs. Ford laughed through the whole story.

Mrs. Ford’s philosophy was evident to those who worked with her: She represented the White House, and most people never have the opportunity to meet their First Lady. So you should take the job seriously -- but not yourself. She got to dance with Cary Grant the night he came to the State Dinner. When the staff came in the next morning, she had enlarged the photo which captured the magic moment of the evening: a close-up of Mrs. Ford, looking gorgeous, dancing in Cary Grant’s arms. The photo was hanging on the wall outside our offices with her inscription: “Eat your hearts out, girls!” That gives you a sense of a certain playfulness in her humor. She liked us to enjoy ourselves, even in planning meetings in the family quarters. She trusted us to make the judgments that kept things moving, and in most cases took our recommendations. But she had a sense of perspective. Work didn’t have to be a grind: you could accomplish things and have a good time too.

Lehman: And the last thing which I am obliged, if there is anything else you would like to add please feel free.

Matson: Mrs. Ford had a unique ability to connect with people. Because she was so feminine and soft-spoken, she surprised people she met who still based their
impressions on “60 Minutes.” She was also sensitive to peoples’ discomfort in meeting their First Lady. She was amused when she went to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to award high school diplomas: the kids were so shy around a “celebrity,” that she couldn’t get them to look at her. She spent a lot of time bending down trying to catch their eyes.

She always spent time talking to people she met along the way -- people who met her at airplanes, volunteers in various states, members of the many groups which asked her to speak, household help in hotels. And while it was charming, it did mean we were nearly always late for events. The family had long been used to this. But when people are waiting on a tarmac, or outside a hall, or at a rally, it could be disconcerting. But then she’d come off the aircraft, elegant, beautifully dressed and smiling, she’d look the person in the eye and start to get to know them. They’d be purring by the time she left.

The woman was charming, engaging, genuinely interested in others, and she was kind and thoughtful. She once threw a surprise birthday party for me on the plane back from New York. It was my 30th and it was late at night after an event. There, all of a sudden, was a cake with many candles and Mrs. Ford, a colleague and a secret service agent singing. She said she was trying to make up for making me work on my big day.

She also looked the part of a First Lady. She was elegant and had good taste and knew what suited her. She kept her weight down, ate carefully, and looked wonderful in her clothes, no accident. Reporters at the time continually asked about her health, always pointing out how “frail” she looked, saying they worried about her. She did suffer from osteoarthritis, and later, the effects of combining medication with alcohol. But frail? Not at the core. And…flash forward: The last time I saw her was several decades after these rumors. There she was, almost ninety-one years old, still going strong.

Mrs. Ford had surprisingly good instincts about how to handle uncomfortable situations and when to take charge. I will never forget a dinner in New York, just a year or so after the President was sworn in. Mrs. Ford was the honoree at a formal dinner for 3,000 guests at a big New York ballroom. There must
have been seventy or eighty people on the multi-tiered dais, and this was a dinner that went on and on and on.

By the end of the evening, the event had lasted so long that most of the media had left, along with half of the audience. Mrs. Ford was still waiting to speak. Finally our host, the organizer of the event, got up to introduce her. Then he clutched his chest and collapsed. The guests and officials were in such shock that for a few minutes, no one moved. Someone asked for a doctor, but no one responded. Most could not see what was happening, but many could hear: the stricken man was getting CPR. Guests seemed uncertain whether or not they should leave, not wanting to be disrespectful, yet knowing there was nothing they could do.

Meanwhile, from my spot in the balcony with the few media still there, traffic on my walkie-talkie indicated the Secret Service was on the verge of removing her from this questionable venue. Then everything stopped, as she stood up at her place on the dais and walked directly to the podium, comforting a very upset man on the way. She took the microphone and said, in a clear, firm voice: "Our host is going to the hospital, and he needs your support. Could we all bow our heads in prayer.” She calmly offered a simple prayer, plain spoken and affecting. When she finished, she invited the guests to leave.

She had a lot of common sense. She used to say, “I’m not so good on the small things, but on the big ones, you can always rely on me!” I always thought of that evening as proof.

Lehman: Maybe you can tell us about Mrs. Ford’s long term effect in the several areas where she has indeed played a significant roll, both in the areas of women’s health and breast cancer and substance addiction.

Matson: Mrs. Ford had significant impact in the national attention she garnered for breast cancer and prevention of it through mammograms. She catapulted both into the mainstream of public dialogue and understanding. She later contributed significantly to the public’s awareness of alcoholism as a disease through her open acknowledgement of her own struggles. She became a
Patricia Matson

beacon for many through her devotion to the Betty Ford Center and her lifelong commitment to working with those in recovery. I know this personally from the many people who have approached me over the years with their emotional, personal stories of how she inspired them.

She also weighed in on the dialogue on women’s equality. She believed strongly that women should receive equal pay for equal work, and she committed herself to passage of the ERA, which did not pass but got the discussion going. I always felt she was a ‘feminist in sheep’s clothing.’ Her gentle demeanor opened doors for people, including legislators, to listen to what she had to say. People weren’t threatened and would therefore be open to what she had to say. She spoke softly, and it had a greater impact.

At President Ford’s funeral, I was reminded of the ceremony at the Capitol during which the John F. Kennedy Foundation gave President Ford its Profile in Courage Award. It was presented by the late Senator Ted Kennedy at the height of his prestige and power. He could not have been more genuine in explaining why President Ford was selected for this honor. He said that President Ford’s decision to pardon President Nixon had been in the country’s best interest. He elaborated: “I didn’t agree with him to begin with, I thought it was the wrong thing to do; but time gives you a better prospective on these things. Now I see what a courageous thing that was to do, and how it helped the country put that chapter of Watergate totally behind us. It was the beginning of us moving on.” He added, “That was the decision that cost him his job, as most historians will acknowledge.”

I was enormously touched by the Senator’s non-partisan statesmanship and specific remarks, and they got me thinking more recently that Betty Ford in her own way also deserved this type of award. For most of us, what could be more frightening than announcing to the world that you would soon be without your breasts, that you had a disease that at the time was expected to lead to death. Remember that this was 1975, decades before today’s culture of confession and self-revelatory bombshells. And what could be more embarrassing than to expose your most shameful secret, that you’re the wife of a retired President and you’re an alcoholic. That had to take feeling
vulnerable to new heights. She continued to talk about all of these subjects without concern from backlash, without worrying about what it would do to her image. To her, she was speaking the truth and it might help others.

I hope when people think of Betty Ford, they will mentally award her their own personal “Profile in Courage” award, because she deserves it. She left a strong imprint on health in America today in two areas that affect millions, and such a long-lasting imprint that today, 40 years later, few can imagine the previous public response to the illnesses during that earlier era. We can be very grateful for her soft but powerful voice.

Lehman: Thank you.
INDEX

Chirdon, Nancy, 5

Ford, Betty
  60 Minutes, interview, 8, 9, 14
  1976 campaign, 10, 11
  addictions, 15, 17
  Assistant Press Secretary, 1, 2
  Betty Ford Center, 16
  Breast Cancer
    awareness, 3, 4, 15, 17
    mammograms, 4,
    public announcement, 3
  Carnegie Hall, 6, 7
  character traits, 3, 13, 14, 16
  China, 1974 Visit as First Lady, 6
  dancing with Cary Grant, 12
  East Wing, 3
   vs. West Wing, 5
  Equal Rights Amendment, 10, 16
  family, 6, 12
  First Lady’s Press Office, 2, 3, 4, 5, 12
  First Press Conference, 2
  Ford Bales, Susan, 9, 10
  Graham, Martha, 6
  Grand Rapids, Michigan, 14
  Press Advance, 5, 6, 11, 12
  Press Corps, 1, 2, 6, 8
  sense of humor, 12
  Walter Reed Hospital, 3

Ford, Gerald R.
  1976 campaign, 5, 11
  1976 Republican Primary, 10
  Funeral, 16
  John F. Kennedy Foundation Profile in Courage Award, 16, 17

Kennedy, Ted, 16

Reagan, Ronald, 10, 11
Rockefeller, Happy, 4
Ruwe, Nancy, 8

Paris, Fran, 5
Porter Rose, Susan, 1

Sufer, Morley, 9
Sorum, Pete, 11

Weidenfeld, Sheila, 4, 5, 8
White House, Nixon Administration, 1, 7, 16