Eulogy by Rosalynn Carter
Betty Ford Memorial Service
Palm Desert, CA
July 12, 2011

Betty Ford was my friend...and I am honored to be here today to help celebrate the life of this truly remarkable woman.

I never imagined when we first met forty years ago that we would develop such a close personal friendship. At the time, Betty was the wife of the vice president of the United States, she had danced with the Martha Graham Dance Company and performed in Carnegie Hall. I knew she was a leader in the fight for women’s rights. And she had come to Georgia with the Michigan Art Train, a project taking six cars filled with great art to rural communities across the country.

Jimmy was governor, and we invited Betty to stay at the Governor’s Mansion. I was nervous. She was the most distinguished guest we had ever entertained. But when she arrived, she was so warm and friendly, that she immediately put me at ease, and we had a good time together. Of course, I didn’t tell her then that my husband was thinking of running for president!

The next time I met Betty was at the White House shortly after the 1976 election. It might have been a very awkward moment. I know from personal experience what a difficult time this was for her -- yet, she was just Betty, gracious as always.

As I assumed the responsibilities of First Lady, I had an excellent role model -- and a tough act to follow! Betty broke new ground in speaking out on women’s issues. Her public disclosure of her own battle with breast cancer lifted the veil of
secrecy from this terrible disease. She used the influence of the office of first lady to promote early detection, and millions of women are in her debt today.

She was never afraid to speak the truth – even about the most sensitive subjects, including her own struggles with alcohol and painkillers. She got some criticisms; I thought she was wonderful! And her honesty gave hope to others – every single day.

By her own example Betty also helped me recover from Jimmy’s loss in 1980. Having embraced the cause of better treatment for men and women recovering from alcoholism and chemical dependence, she worked tirelessly as former first lady to establish the Betty Ford Center...and showed me that there can be life after the White House.....a very full life.

In 1984 we both participated in a panel at the Ford Presidential Library on the role of first ladies. We found that our interests in addictive diseases and mental health came together in many ways and that we could be a stronger force if we worked as partners...and we did for many years, sometimes traveling to Washington to lobby for our causes – especially parity for mental health and substance use disorders in all health insurance plans. (I’m so glad she lived to see this happen.) In Washington, she would round up the Republicans; I would get the Democrats...We didn’t always get what we wanted, but I think we were fairly effective!

After the 1984 conference, Betty wrote me a note that I still treasure in which she expressed her admiration for women who had the courage of their convictions and “did what others were too timid to attempt.” Surely this is a most appropriate description of Betty – someone who was willing to do things a
bit differently than they’d been done before; someone who had the courage and the grace to fight fear, stigma and prejudice wherever she encountered it. And today it is almost impossible to imagine a time when people were afraid to reveal they had cancer or to speak publicly about personal struggles with alcohol or addiction. She was a tireless advocate for those struggling alone and ashamed to seek help. It was a privilege to work with her to bring addiction and mental health problems out of the closet.

Historians have said that our husbands, Jimmy and Jerry, developed a closer relationship than any other presidents after leaving the White House. I think Betty and I had a similar relationship.

In closing I just want to add that Betty and I shared another important passion – our husbands and families. Her partnership with Jerry – both public and private – helped heal the country and strengthen the family unit -- in its many varied forms. Her love of her children --- Michael, Jack, Steven and Susan -- was unbounded, and her grandchildren were a source of constant pleasure. When we got together later in our lives, we often talked about our hopes and dreams for our children and grandchildren – and even great-grandchildren.

To you here who mourn the loss of your mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother today, Jimmy and I extend our most sincere sympathies. We want you to know of the deep love and respect we have for this extraordinary woman. It was my privilege to know her.

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