

## **Eleanor Roosevelt**

Anna Eleanor Roosevelt was born in New York City on October 11, 1884, to the younger brother of Theodore Roosevelt. Their family was a well-to-do family but Eleanor's father was known for his alcoholism. By the age of 8, he was committed to a mental asylum. That same year her beautiful mother died and she was sent to live with her grandmother. She was an awkward, shy young lady, seen as very unattractive. Grandmother Hall nicknamed her "Granny" because of her looks and behavior. Two years later, Eleanor's father died. She was sent to Allenswood, a private school in England at 15. This afforded her the first chance to develop self-confidence among other girls.

In 1902, the year after President McKinley was assassinated and her uncle, Teddy became President of the United States, she left Allenswood and made her society debut at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. In her tight circle of friends was her fifth cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The two met and formed an attraction for each other. The following year, in 1903 they were engaged. Uncle Teddy gave the bride away at their 1905 marriage in New York. She gave birth to 6 children over the next ten years, with one, Franklin, Jr. dying of influenza in infancy. Eleanor joined the Junior League of New York where she taught calisthenics and dancing to immigrants. She also enrolled in the Consumers' League and investigates working conditions in the garment districts. These were to be the beginning of her life-long ambition to help those less privileged than her.

Husband, Franklin began to get involved in the New York Democratic political scene. He served in the state Senate from 1910 to 1913 and Eleanor started her career as his helpmate. She gained a knowledge of Washington and its ways while he served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1918, Eleanor learned the devastating news of Franklin's affair with his long-time friend Lucy Mercer. She discovered love letters revealing that Franklin was involved with Lucy. It drove a wedge into their marriage that many say lingered for years. They talked of divorce, but when Franklin promised never to see Lucy again, the marriage continued. She sought outside involvement in reformist causes.

At the outbreak of American involvement in World War I, Eleanor volunteered at St. Elizabeth Hospital to visit veterans, and she volunteered at the International Congress of Working Women in Washington. Franklin ran unsuccessfully for the Vice Presidency on the Democratic ticket in 1920 and Eleanor campaigned faithfully at his side. In 1921, Franklin was stricken with poliomyelitis while vacationing at their home at Campobello Island, off Nova Scotia. Eleanor was at his side becoming his nurse and right-hand assistant, politically. She became active in the women's division of the New York State Democratic Committee to keep his interest in life and politics active. From his successful campaign for governor in 1928 to the day of his death, she dedicated her life to his purposes. She traveled the state and then the nation to become his eyes and ears and learn of the American people. She sent him numerous daily memos that she expected action on.

They made an exceptional team. She was more straight-forward and open, more uncompromisingly moral; while he possessed the political talent, the more finely tuned

sense of timing, the better feel for the populace. She researched and knew what needed to be done; he knew how to get things done. In 1929 the great Depression began under President Herbert Hoover. While Hoover wasn't directly to blame, it almost assured a Democratic Presidential victory in 1932.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the 32nd President of the United States, there was much work for him to bring the country out of poverty. Franklin implemented the first of his New Deal programs to bring the country out of the Depression it was in. He worked to create jobs, open new opportunities and give Americans hope. She helped start the National Youth Association to help young people find jobs and get off the streets and out of trouble. Because of her earlier involvement in organizations to help others, she understood social conditions transformed the role of First Lady accordingly. She never shirked official entertaining; she greeted thousands with her endearing charm. She was the first President's wife to hold all-women press conferences. She also broke precedent to travel on her own to all parts of the country, give lectures and radio broadcasts, and express her opinions frankly in her daily syndicated newspaper column, "My Day." This made her an easy target for critics.

Eleanor abhorred segregationist laws and refused to abide by them. She resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution when they refused to allow black singer, Marian Anderson from performing in their auditorium. She felt it was her destiny and unique role, though to speak out and become involved. She gave a voice to people who did not have access to power. Her confrontational style compelled her husband to sign a series of Executive Orders barring discrimination in the administration of various New Deal projects. From that point on, African Americans' share in the New Deal work projects expanded, and Eleanor's reputation and legacy began to grow. She understood symbolism and used it to further her agenda to bring the disadvantaged into the mainstream of American society.

At the outbreak of World War II she stepped up her role in the White House Team. She urged Franklin to allow her to tour the Pacific Theatre of battle. There she was shocked at the treatment of black servicemen and women. In a war against Nazi and Japanese racism, she insisted that the country could not fight racism abroad while tolerating it at home. She became a tireless worker for equal rights under the law and her stances were ahead of their time. She also challenged practices and institutions that held women back in society. She used her "bully pulpit" of radio and newspaper articles to recruit women to work in the factories while the men were fighting in the war. She argued on principle that everyone who wanted to work had a right to be productive when women were being fired at the war's end.

Franklin served in the Presidency longer than anyone before or since his time. He died in 1945, after over twelve years in office. He was at the Little White House in Warm Springs, Georgia, where he went to retreat and convalesce for the polio affliction. Eleanor was in Washington when he passed away. The story is told that it was she who told, Vice President Truman that the President was dead. She then immediately left for Warm Springs. She was shocked to find that Lucy Mercer, Franklin's former lover was with him

in his last hours. It hurt her and broke her heart. She took some comfort in the love shown for Franklin and his presidency in the days of national mourning following. She saw how what he (and they as a team) did for so many lives across the country.

With every closed door there is a new opening. Leaving the White House opened a new chapter in her life. Within a year, she began her service as American spokesperson in the United Nations. Eleanor was elected as head of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. She began to draft the Declaration of Human Rights. She initiated the creation of a group to focus on domestic social reform and resistance against the developing Cold War with the Communist Bloc of nations. She threatened to resign from her post in the U.N. if President Truman failed to recognize the newly formed state of Israel in 1948. That same year, her Declaration of Human Rights was passed by the United Nations and adopted. She continued her struggle for human rights both in the country and abroad.

President Kennedy tapped her to serve again in the United Nations in 1961. He appointed her head of the Commission on the Status of Women. She also monitored the progress of the civil rights movement in the United States. She became an international celebrity. Eleanor passed away in 1962 and was buried in Hyde Park, NY beside Franklin. She made a name for herself in her own right, but her focus was always on the behalf of others instead of her own ambition. Although she was wealthy, she championed the cause of the poor and disadvantaged. Today she is recognized as one of the most influential women of the Twentieth Century who blazed paths for women and led the battle for social justice.

***Permission is granted to reprint this article provided the following paragraph is included in full:***

**Jim Mathis, CSP is The Reinvention Strategist™, an international Certified Speaking Professional and author. To subscribe to his free personal and professional development newsletter, please send an email to: [subscribe@jimmathis.com](mailto:subscribe@jimmathis.com) with the word SUBSCRIBE in the subject. An electronic copy will be sent out to you every month. For more information on how Jim and his programs can benefit your organization or group, please call 888-688-0220, or visit his web site: [www.jimmathis.com](http://www.jimmathis.com).**