

Obituaries

Esther Stassen, wife of former governor, dies at 94

She entertained presidents, diplomats and helped U.N.

By Kimberly Hayes Taylor
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Esther Glewwe Stassen, who entertained U.S. presidents, diplomats and heads of state as wife of former Minnesota governor and U.S. presidential candidate Harold Stassen, died Saturday at her home in Bloomington. She was 94.

During the writing of the United Nations charter in 1945 in San Francisco, where Harold Stassen was a delegate, Esther Stassen was instrumental in keeping negotiations from breaking down, her husband said.

As hostess to the other delegates' wives, Esther Stassen learned that the Soviet diplomats couldn't freely negotiate because of an order from Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin.

Stassen told her husband, who got word to President Harry Truman. The president flew a diplomat to Moscow to meet with Stalin, who changed his orders to the Soviet U.N. delegates. The deadlock was broken and the negotiations continued. "It was all because of her and what she was able to find out," Harold Stassen

said Sunday. "We were a team ever since we were 12."

The couple, married for 70 years, met in May 1918 at a church picnic in South St. Paul.

Harold Stassen, who served as Minnesota's governor from 1938 to 1944, recalled first seeing his future bride as she ran down a hill during a race, her brunette pigtailed blowing in the wind.

As his wife, Esther Stassen often hosted dinner parties for as many as 60 people. While her husband was president of the University of Pennsylvania, she entertained the presidents of Yale, Harvard and Princeton. While he was a politician, she dined with President Dwight Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, said her granddaughter Rachel Stassen-Berger of Minneapolis.

"She might be the only real lady I have ever met," Stassen-Berger said. "She made things really beautiful. She had skills to do things most of us never learn to do. . . . She had a certain gentleness about her. The seventh of 12 children, even when she was young, her siblings called her 'Little Mother.'"

Esther Stassen was an artist, whose oils and watercolors won awards from the Smithsonian Institution.

Her daughter, Kathleen Stassen Berger of New York City, said that her mother encouraged her children to be creative, to write and tell stories. They both became college professors.

During an era when nearly half of American marriages end in divorce, Kathleen Stassen Berger said, her mother taught her how to hold a family together as her husband made the transition from Minnesota farm boy to governor and to Republican presidential candidate.

"Many people would not have found Dad an easy person to follow," said Stassen Berger, who has been married for 33 years. "She gave us the example of how to build and sustain a marriage over a long, long time despite all the things that happened. Their love for each other was and is incredible."

Other survivors include son Glen Stassen of Pasadena, Calif., six other grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Visitation will be held from 5



Star Tribune file photo

Esther Glewwe Stassen, an award-winning artist, and former Gov. Harold Stassen, shown in 1979, were married for 70 years. They met in 1918 at a church picnic in South St. Paul.

to 8 p.m. Tuesday at English-Meeker & Kandt Funeral Home, 140 8th Av. N., South St. Paul. Services will be at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday at the Riverview Bap-

tist Church, 14 Moreland Av. E., West St. Paul.

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HAROLD STASSEN: 1907-2001

'He was smart and he was brave'

Former Minnesota Gov. Harold Stassen, who died early Sunday, gained a reputation for quixotic runs for the presidency in his later years. But in his prime, he had a bold vision.

BY LISA DONOVAN
AND BILL GARDNER
PIONEER PRESS

Former Gov. Harold Stassen, a political giant who distinguished himself as the youngest man to hold Minnesota's highest office and went on to become a perennial presidential candidate, died early Sunday at a nursing home in Bloomington.

He was 93.

His public service spanned the bulk of the 20th century. Family, friends and supporters remember Stassen as an intellectual and able politician, at least in his early years, as well as a lifelong reformer.

"He rose to the top for two reasons," said former Gov. Al Quie, a fellow Republican: "He was smart and he was brave. A lot of people are too chicken to (run for public office)."

As recently as January, Stassen attended the State of the State address of Gov. Jesse Ventura, where Ventura paid tribute to his predecessor.

"First lady Terri Ventura and I send our condolences to the family of Governor Stassen," Ventura said Sunday. "As Minnesotans, we can be proud of a statesman who never gave up his fight for a better state, a better country and a peaceful world."

Former state GOP chairman Chuck Slocum said Stassen believed government could improve people's lives, as it did with Great



DAWN VILLELLA/PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

Harold Stassen salutes during the dedication of a state office building named after him in St. Paul in May. His nine bids for the presidency tainted his political image, but allies said that running for office was his way to promote his ideas.

STASSEN CONTINUED ON 7A ▶

Stassen: Many forgot he almost won the GOP presidential nomination in 1948

▼ CONTINUED FROM 1A

Depression welfare-to-work programs.

"Anyone who was around him came to sense a greatness at this man's capacity as a thinker. He looked to the future with great optimism and (in) that sense, he was like Hubert Humphrey," Slocum said.

Also like Humphrey, his career had humble beginnings. Stassen grew up on a vegetable farm in West St. Paul, graduated from the University of Minnesota Law School and was elected Dakota County attorney at age 23.

He held that post until 1938, when Republicans were searching for an attractive candidate to challenge Gov. Elmer Benson of the Farmer-Labor Party.

Stassen's election was "a surprise to me," Stassen recalled later. He was 31, then the youngest governor in U.S. history, and was quickly dubbed "the Boy Wonder."

As governor, he pushed through a civil-service policy that all but eliminated political patronage. He also proposed a 30-day "cooling-off period" to help resolve labor-management disputes.

A progressive Republican, Stassen was re-elected in 1940 and 1942. He gained national attention in 1940 by giving the keynote address at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia, where he told delegates that the United States should become involved in the growing conflict in Europe.

Underscoring that conviction, he resigned in 1943 to enlist in the Navy. Within months, he became aide to Adm. William "Bull" Halsey, commander of the South Pacific Force. Stassen was decorated three times, was awarded six major battle stars and was put in

charge of the Navy's prisoner evacuation program in Japan.

In 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt sent Stassen to San Francisco as part of the U.S. delegation to try to draft a charter for the United Nations. Stassen was the last surviving signer of the U.N. Charter.

His attention then focused on gaining a more prominent role in national politics. He was profiled by Harper's magazine as a "Young Man Going Somewhere."

He made a tour of Europe in 1947, meeting with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, Pope Pius XII and

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former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, among others. That year he also published his political beliefs in the book "Where I Stand."

A year later came what may have been the peak of his political career: a campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. He narrowly lost to New York Gov. Thomas Dewey, who mounted a famous and unsuccessful campaign against Harry Truman that fall.

Stassen did eventually make it to the White House. He served in President Dwight Eisenhower's Cabinet, on the National Security Council. He was also director of

the Mutual Security Agency, an early attempt at arms control between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union.

In 1958, he moved to Pennsylvania, where he practiced law and lost races for governor and for mayor of Philadelphia. He returned to Minnesota in 1978.

He never left behind his campaign for the Oval Office, however. He ran nine campaigns in all, the last in 1992.

Announcing his candidacy at the Minnesota state Capitol, Stassen said he was running because "I know what is wrong ... (and) I know what to do to correct it."

He made two final political bids at the end of his life. In 1996, Stassen offered to serve as a running mate for Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, jokingly suggesting he could make the aging candidate look young by comparison. And in 1998, at age 91, he tried to file as a candidate for governor, but he was turned away because he had no running mate.

The perennial campaigns, like the stiff toupee he wore late in life, obscured his political image, but his closest allies say that was just part of his complex, if misunderstood, view of public service.

Intellectual and serious, Stassen was described by journalist William White as the person with "the most profound absence of a sense of humor in American politics."

But former Gov. Elmer Andersen respected his dogged determination: "Some people thought it was about self-promotion, but he thought by running for president, it gave him a forum for his ideas. He felt compelled to keep preaching his ideas, even though there

"I know what is wrong ... (and) I know what to do to correct it."

HAROLD STASSEN
ANNOUNCING HIS PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDACY IN 1992

were fewer and fewer people willing to listen to it."

Privately, supporters also remembered him for his devotion to his family.

"In politics, there's an awful lot of people who drift away from their wives," said former Gov. Quie. "And he and his wife loved each other all the way through."

His daughter, Kathleen Esther Berger, of New York City, said she thinks her father's example will live on.

"People know the public Harold Stassen, who was someone who could bring together heads of state, rich and poor," Berger said in a prepared statement. "But I

knew the private Harold Stassen, who was caring and compassionate toward every family member and whose private life had the same integrity, truth and justice as his public persona."

He is also survived by son Glen Harold Stassen, of Pasadena, Calif.; seven grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Services will be held next week-end. Visitation will be 4 to 8 p.m. Friday at the English-Meeker and

Kandt Funeral Home, 140 Eighth Ave. N., South St. Paul. Services will be at 10 a.m. Saturday at Riverview Baptist Church, 14 Moreland Ave. E., West St. Paul.

The family requests that memorials be sent to the Esther and Harold Stassen Scholarship Fund, Fuller Theological Seminary, Box 235, Pasadena, CA 91182.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.