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Suzanne F. Roberts, philanthropist, performer, and broadcaster, dies at 98

Suzanne F. Roberts, 98, an exuberant and unstoppable figure who left her mark on Philadelphia's civic, broadcast, and performing arts worlds for decades, died Monday, April 20, at her Center City home. The announcement of her death came from her family and followed several months of declining health. As news circulated, praise poured in from here and elsewhere. "She was a remarkable woman," said former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, a close friend. "She was always upbeat."

Mrs. Roberts cut a wide swath as an actress, civic educator, children's therapist, broadcaster, and philanthropist, and a just plain lively person. She came from one wealthy family, married into what became another, and used her privileged platform to create projects for the public good. But the progression wasn't immediate. "When she married my dad, he didn't have two cents to rub together," said son Brian. "My dad was a struggling, aspiring entrepreneur." Later, she didn't just sign checks or sit in board meetings. "I don't care for boards," Mrs. Roberts said in 2003. "I'd much rather be doing. I was never a lady who lunched, never wanted to be."

By birth she was a Fleisher, daughter of Alfred W. Fleisher, real-estate magnate and philanthropist. By marriage, she was a Roberts, spouse of Ralph J. Roberts, founder and chairman of Comcast Corp., now the nation's largest cable provider and a global media firm. She and her husband used much of their wealth to support and enrich the city's cultural life. "She's a very dedicated person," her husband told The Inquirer in 2001. "And when she decides to work on a project, there's no stopping her."

Born in Philadelphia, Mrs. Roberts was only 7 when her father died in 1928. A cofounder of the real-estate firm Mastbaum Bros. & Fleisher, he was a philanthropist, prison reformer, and supporter of Jewish causes. Her civic-minded mother later married Leon Sunstein, another prominent leader. Continuing the family tradition, the Fleisher children became volunteers and philanthropists. She grew up in a comfortable home in Elkins Park, attending Oak Lane Country Day School in Cheltenham Township and then Harcum Junior College in Bryn Mawr.

After completing her local schooling, she moved to New York and studied the Stanislavski Method of acting at the Tamara Daykarhanova School of the Stage. A 5-foot-9 beauty, she turned the head of Ralph Roberts when they met as teens at a dance. They married in 1942 and lived "a life of romance and fun," she told friends. He would later say he had never met anyone so endearing, exhilarating, and confounding. "She had a voracious appetite for life," said daughter Lisa.

In the 1940s, Mrs. Roberts sold war bonds and performed for the USO and the Treasury Department. She acted in theaters around the area, never accepting pay, mindful that others needed the money more than she did. She was a born performer. On Broadway and on many of Philadelphia's biggest stages, her roles included Eleanor in *The Lion in Winter*, the lead in *Lysistrata*, Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Kate in *The*

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Taming of the Shrew, and Nurse Ratched in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. "Ralph came every night to see me in every show," she told Philadelphia City Paper in 2005. "Tears would roll down from his eyes during emotional scenes, even though he'd seen the play 10 times or more."

She last took to the stage in 2001, at the Suzanne Roberts Theatre in A.R. Gurney's Love Letters. The play's format allowed her to deliver her lines sitting down. As a media host, Mrs. Roberts performed on the award-winning radio show Within Our Gates on WFIL, dramatizing the lives of outstanding citizens such as first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and abolitionist Lucretia Mott.

As a voice actress, she played roles in a CBS show, A Dramatization of the Classics, and described news events in the weekly show This Week in Philadelphia. Afterward, NBC named her the "Number One Radio Actress in Philadelphia." Her radio work led Mayor Richardson Dilworth and U.S. Sen. Joseph Clark to invite her to write and direct their radio and TV campaigns. Mrs. Roberts thus became a pioneer in modern media. In 1952, she turned her experience into one of the first books on the subject, *The Candidate and Television*. "She was way ahead of her time," said her son, the chairman and chief executive of Comcast.

Appearing in commercials for products ranging from refrigerators to children's furniture, Mrs. Roberts was a frequent presence on local TV. Her biggest success came in 2001 when, at age 80, sensing a lack of programming for seniors, she started five-minute segments called *Seeking Solutions With Suzanne*. They aired on Comcast's channel CN8 and CNN Headline News for almost two decades. In the segments, which later expanded to a half-hour, she underwent cataract surgery, took tap-dancing lessons, belly-danced, and rode a motorcycle, all with the tape rolling. The programs won two Mid-Atlantic Emmy Awards. "Did you ever want to feel the roar of the pavement, the sun in your face, the wind in your hair?" Mrs. Roberts said into the camera during the motorcycle segment.

On the air, Mrs. Roberts appeared game for almost anything. She urged viewers to follow suit: "If I can do it, you can, too!" Kelly Ryan, her longtime producer who became a friend, was asked by an Inquirer reporter in 2003 if there was anything Mrs. Roberts wouldn't try. "Not yet," Ryan said. In a segment last year, Mrs. Roberts interviewed Rendell about his having Parkinson's disease. The two were friends; she agreed to help him go public with his medical news. "People actually watch Suzanne," Rendell said. "She's got a very good, innate sense of letting the person she's interviewing have their head."

Since Parkinson's patients practice boxing to improve balance, he gave her boxing gloves. He also put on gloves, as would a sparring partner. "She punched me on the air," he said. Mrs. Roberts became a therapist for troubled children by the most indirect of routes. She, her husband, and their children took a 1970 trip to the Navajo Nation, where they volunteered for a month. Her daughter Catherine Clifton said the trip was life-changing. "It was important to her, when we took family trips, to give back to others," Clifton said.

While there, Mrs. Roberts volunteered at the psychiatric ward of a Public Health Service hospital in Gallup, N.M. Using techniques learned in acting class, she was able to reach withdrawn children. She was invited back to teach her methods to the hospital staff. In Philadelphia, she worked with troubled youngsters at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children. A documentary of her work, *Discoveries in Communication*,

was shown at the International Convention of Child Psychiatry, and she began traveling internationally to demonstrate her methods.

She became a part-time therapist for preschoolers at the Children's Crisis Treatment Center in Philadelphia while also attending night school. At age 58, she earned a bachelor's degree in counseling from Antioch University, and two years later, a master's degree in special education and counseling from Antioch. She volunteered and supported projects in the areas of veterans' affairs, HIV/AIDS education, workplace safety, addiction treatment and counseling, and race relations. She and her husband donated millions to the arts, especially theater and dance. They also supported initiatives in higher education and advances in medicine.

The Suzanne F. Roberts Cultural Development Fund, which she created, encouraged dance and theater companies in the area, making her one of their largest supporters. A decade ago, Mrs. Roberts began supporting BalletX, a contemporary dance company in the city. "Mrs. Roberts makes you feel seen and heard," said director Christine Cox. "She looks you in the eye and makes you feel like one of the most special people in the world. She believes in you and the artists in Philadelphia. She brings joy, laughter, and energy into the world. Her curiosity and passion for life is palpable."

Perhaps her most high-profile project was the Suzanne Roberts Theatre on the Avenue of the Arts. Home to the Philadelphia Theatre Company, it opened in 2007. At the time, it was the city's first new theater in a decade. She donated money, attended performances, and offered constructive criticism. Paige Price, the Philadelphia Theatre Company's producing artistic director, summed Mrs. Roberts' impact: "Suzanne had a transformative effect on the cultural landscape of Philadelphia — her belief and dedication to all the artistic talent in the region will be felt for generations to come. ... For decades, she has always offered us her unwavering support and friendship. She was a generous performer at heart, and all future performances at the theatre will celebrate her truly unique spirit." In 2014, she and her husband received the Philadelphia Award, recognizing their longtime contributions to the city.

Ralph Roberts died in 2015. In addition to her son and daughters, she is survived by son Ralph Jr.; eight grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A son, Douglas, died in 2011. Her life will be celebrated after the effects of COVID-19 have passed. – **[Philadelphia Inquirer](#)**; **[more from NBC10, Philadelphia](#)**

The [coronavirus pandemic](#) is boosting momentum for major broadband legislation, highlighting the widespread lack of high-speed internet in U.S. homes at a time when it has become more essential than ever. Leading lawmakers of both parties say the long-delayed issue of closing the so-called digital divide is gaining new prominence, as Washington weighs initiatives to help speed economic recovery and improve U.S. competitiveness. "Having affordable broadband—it's not a luxury, it's a necessity," said [Rep. Mike Doyle \(D., Pa.\)](#), chairman of the House communications and technology subcommittee. "Broadband infrastructure has to be one of the key elements to that, and this pandemic has brought that right to the forefront."

House Democrats are likely to lead the legislative push for expanded broadband in coming weeks. But many Senate Republicans also are keenly interested, and say the pandemic is underscoring the need for action. "It helps us drive the point home as to urgency," said Sen. Roger

Wicker (R., Miss.), the chairman of the powerful Senate Commerce Committee. "Absolutely it gives us an impetus—that is one of the silver linings here."

The issue of accelerating access to home broadband has been stalled for years in Congress. That is largely because of the huge costs involved in serving many remote regions, and lack of agreement on funding sources. But now, there is new impetus as Americans shelter at home, forcing them to flock online to work, apply for new jobs and obtain a variety of vital services ranging from small-business loans, unemployment benefits and IRS payments to school classes and telemedicine.

A new report from the Federal Communications Commission, set to be released soon, is expected to say the number of Americans lacking access to high-speed broadband declined by more than 14% in 2018. But some advocates have questioned government estimates, saying government data overstates by millions the number of people who have broadband access. Many millions more have broadband access but can't afford the service, survey data shows. Soaring use of smartphones has also given many people an excuse not to buy home broadband service, particularly in urban and suburban areas with good wireless coverage.

Despite lofty promises of universal broadband service by federal officials over the past decade, current government subsidies to encourage expansion of broadband networks to hard-to-serve areas and to the poor are sometimes criticized as inefficient and inadequate. The biggest existing program, the Universal Service Fund administered by the FCC, is funded by fees charged largely on telecommunications services such as long-distance calls. But rising demand for the funds is helping push fees for the Universal Service Fund to more than 21% for the first quarter of 2020, up from about 5.5% 20 years ago, straining the system. "Our nation's universal service system had its last grand rehab in 1996. The world is a little different," said FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel, a Democrat who has clashed with the commission's Republican majority over how to modernize the program.

FCC Chairman Ajit Pai, a Republican, defended the agency's record under his leadership. Mr. Pai noted that he grew up in rural Kansas and has a "deep commitment" to expanding broadband access, including by modernizing regulations governing the program. He said that between 2016 and 2018, the number of Americans without access to high-speed home broadband fell by 30%, while the number of homes with access to high-speed fiber-optic lines also has increased rapidly in recent years. Meanwhile, the coronavirus outbreak is underscoring the gulf between those communities that have broadband and those that don't. "The urgency of this issue is like triple times what it has been," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R., W.Va.), who co-chairs the Senate Broadband Caucus. Under existing federal programs to subsidize broadband, "we're getting there, but it's too damn slow...It could happen in a stimulus bill."

Sen. Capito said she hears frequently about the problem from physicians in her mountainous state who often are unable to use telemedicine because of patients' lack of access. Many students and school systems in the U.S. have been unable to use remote-learning programs during the long school shutdown. That is highlighting the so-called "homework gap" between have and have-not communities. In Hartford Central School District in upstate New York, fewer than half of the families have access to high-speed internet, Superintendent Andrew

Cook said. Even in the district's main town, high-speed cables don't run down every street, he said.

With schools closed, teachers are calling students by phone when needed, and the district is distributing paper assignments. "My biggest concern is when we come back next year, what that gap of learning is going to be," Mr. Cook said. In late March, President Trump and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi both said they would push infrastructure legislation, including major broadband components, as part of the coronavirus recovery. But attention quickly shifted to a shorter-term effort to shore up small-business lending and other immediate health-care and recovery efforts.

As a result, the effort to advance a broadband infrastructure package is still coming together. It also faces multiple pitfalls, politics being perhaps the biggest. Already, some Republicans worry Democrats will seek ambitious new environmental or election-reform initiatives in pandemic-related legislation. They privately question whether Democrats want to give President Trump a big legislative win on infrastructure ahead of the 2020 election.

Democrats for their part worry that conservative Republicans will balk at spending more federal money on new broadband and other infrastructure initiatives, as they have in the past. It remains to be seen how much the pandemic will tip the political scales. "I know there is a great deal of interest among Republicans and Democrats in taking a small portion of the funds in the next phase" for broadband, said Sen. Wicker. He added, "The president is talking about a Phase 4 [of legislation] and Republicans and Democrats are talking infrastructure as a part of that. I do not think it will be enacted without a broadband component." – Wall Street Journal

Stay safe



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