

Famous New Yorker Nancy Davis Reagan



**Official White House Portrait
Library of Congress, Prints
and Photographs Division
[reproduction number
LC-USZ62-94021]**

Nancy Davis dreamed of stardom as an actor but achieved far greater celebrity as Nancy Reagan, first lady of the United States during the 1980s.

Nancy was born Anne Francis Robbins in Manhattan on July 6, 1921. Her mother was an aspiring actress and her godmother was the famous actress Alia Nazimova. When Nancy's parents divorced in 1928, she lived with an aunt in Maryland until her mother married a rich doctor, Loyal Davis in 1929. Nancy Davis moved to Chicago and lived a more privileged life. She attended the Girls' Latin School and graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts with a degree in dramatic arts in 1943.

A college degree didn't guarantee an acting career. Nancy Davis worked in a department store until she won a small non-speaking role in a play that eventually made it to Broadway. As her career advanced, her mother arranged with an old friend, the movie actor Spencer Tracy, to get Nancy a screen test at the Metro-Goldwyn Mayer studio in Hollywood. The test earned Nancy a seven-year contract, starting in 1949.

Nancy Davis's name soon threatened to get her in trouble. In the early years of the Cold War, movie studios maintained a "blacklist" of talent suspected of communist ties or sympathies. People on the blacklist could not get work in the movies. Davis feared that she would be confused with another Nancy Davis, an alleged leftist, and blacklisted by mistake.

She reportedly sought help from the president of the Screen Actors' Guild, Ronald Reagan. After Davis was elected to the SAG Board in 1950, she and Reagan began going steady. They married in 1952, but Davis continued to act under her maiden name.

Ronald Reagan soon became a TV spokesman for General Electric, while Nancy acted only occasionally after their marriage. In the 1960s, the Reagans joined a new grassroots political movement opposed to high taxes and excessive government regulation of the economy. After a well-received speech at the 1964 Republican National Convention, Reagan was encouraged to run for political office. He was elected governor of California in 1966 and 1970.


As first lady of California, Nancy Reagan served on the state arts commission and as a supporter of the Foster Grandparents Program. She became first lady of the United States after Reagan was elected President in 1980. Reagan's victory began an era of increasingly bitter partisanship in American politics. Nancy was widely disliked by her husband's political opponents, but remained one of the country's most admired women throughout the Reagan administration.

Nancy Reagan became best known for her "Just Say No" publicity campaign against drug abuse by young people. She brought her anti-drug message to the United Nations general assembly, becoming the initial first lady to address that body. While she represented conservative values to many people, she played a progressive part in the evolution of the first lady into a more influential voice in public policy.

Once the Reagans retired, partisan feeling against Nancy faded. After Ronald Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1994, Nancy earned sympathy nationwide. After he died in 2004, she planned his state funeral. Until her own passing on March 6, 2016, Nancy Reagan remained a model of class and dignity for women in public life.

To learn more about Nancy Reagan and other first ladies of the U.S. go to The National First Lady Museum at www.firstladies.org. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA Newspaper In Education Program. All rights reserved 2017.

For a teaching guide go to www.nynpa.com/nie/niefamousny.html



Manhattan is the most densely populated of NYC's 5 boroughs. Manhattan Island is bounded by the Hudson, East and Harlem rivers.