

Beat: News

SARAH BRADY-GUN CONTROL ACTIVIST IS DEAD AT 73.

FAMILY STATES CAUSE WAS PNEUMONIA

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USPA NEWS - Sarah Brady, who became a tireless gun control activist after her husband, the White House press secretary James S. Brady, was shot and left partly paralyzed in the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan in 1981, died on Friday in Alexandria, Va. She was 73.

Her family said in a statement that the cause was pneumonia. Mrs. Brady had been treated for lung cancer in the past. Mr. Brady died last August, also at 73.

The two became perhaps the most visible champions of gun control in the United States and shaped the debate over the issue as much as anyone. Side by side, with Mrs. Brady often pushing her husband in his wheelchair, they built a nonprofit organization to further the cause, lobbied members of Congress and campaigned around the nation as implacable foes of the National Rifle Association.

Mrs. Brady had been a schoolteacher in Virginia before embarking on a decade-long career in Republican politics in the late 1960s while her husband pursued a career in government. He worked for three federal agencies, served as a communications consultant to the House of Representatives and was an aide to senators before being named Reagan's press secretary in January 1981.

"The first two months of that year were the most exciting we ever spent," Mrs. Brady wrote in an op-ed article in The New York Times in 1985.

But their lives were changed forever that March, when, outside a Washington hotel, Mr. Brady was shot in the head by John W. Hinckley Jr., a mentally troubled young man who wanted to kill the president because he thought it would win him the affections of the actress Jodie Foster.

President Reagan and two police officers were wounded in the attack as well, but Mr. Brady the most grievously. The bullet damaged the right section of his brain, paralyzing his left arm, weakening his left leg, damaging his short-term memory and impairing his speech. When he died last year, the authorities said the gunshot wound he sustained in 1981 was the cause of death and ruled the case a homicide.

As James and Sarah Brady campaigned for gun control laws, many saw Mrs. Brady as the wellspring of much of that energy. It was she who began their battle against the gun lobby in 1985 with a phone call to Handgun Control Inc., a small organization later renamed the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. And it was she who often spoke for the group in the news media.

Mr. Brady was initially constrained not only by his injuries but also by the fact that he technically remained White House press secretary until the end of Reagan's presidency, in 1989, and so was unable to campaign actively on the issue.

It was not her husband's shooting that turned Mrs. Brady into an activist, however. It was an episode in 1985 in her husband's hometown, Centralia, Ill., when her 5-year-old son, Scott, found a loaded .22 pistol "the kind that had been used to shoot her husband" on the seat of a family friend's pickup truck and pointed it at his mother.

That bill, which was strongly backed by the National Rifle Association, became law in 1986 and significantly weakened the Gun Control Act of 1968. But it also spurred Sarah Brady and later her husband into action. Their efforts were rewarded 12 years after the shooting, when President Bill Clinton signed the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, which mandated background checks and waiting periods.

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