

Patsy Takemoto Mink was beloved by friends and foes alike for her integrity, determination, compassion and honesty; these qualities together with her personal history formed a recipe that helped her change the world. Before her passing in 2002, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) worked with Mink—a longtime AAUW member—on a range of gender equity issues. The legacy of this pioneering civil rights leader can be seen across the United States. Little girls kicking soccer balls and winning spelling bees; women performing revolutionary research and making their mark in the legal profession—all are tangible evidence of Mink’s visionary leadership and infamous resolve.

Mink was instrumental in creating opportunities for others, but she also was a trailblazer in her own right. She overcame gender and racial discrimination to become one of the most influential public servants of her generation. She dared to imagine a world without discriminatory barriers and tenaciously shepherded laws to open new doors for women and people of color. Mink urged—no, *demand*—that her country embrace the talents and abilities of all citizens, strengthening the social and economic fabric of our nation in the process.

Mink was born to a Japanese American family on the island of Maui. She first won an election as a teenager during World War II, when she became student body president. Mink campaigned in the face of daunting challenges, which helped to shape her lifelong signature style. Consider the context: the attack on Pearl Harbor was fresh in everyone’s mind, and Mink was the first girl in the school’s history to have such leadership aspirations. This future valedictorian overcame the antagonism of fellow students who despised all things Japanese. She orchestrated a strategy of reaching out to different student factions, which made a critical difference. Her ability to organize effective coalitions would later become a hallmark

Visionary Civil Rights Pioneer Patsy Takemoto Mink (1927–2002)

By Lisa M. Maatz and Michele Warholic Wetherald

of her legislative career.

When Mink transferred from the University of Hawaii to the University of Nebraska, she again confronted discrimination—racial segregation in the dormitories. Outraged, Mink built a broad coalition that forced the university to change its policies.

Mink returned to Honolulu in 1948 to prepare for medical school and applied to 20 schools. Despite her stellar academic record, none were willing to accept a woman. Disappointed but undaunted, she decided the legal system represented the most promising way to press medical schools to accept women. When Mink applied, the University of Chicago Law School also had a policy against women applicants. But the admissions committee thought “Patsy” was a proper name for a man, and only discovered otherwise when she arrived on campus. She earned a J.D. in 1951 and became the first Japanese American woman to practice law in Hawaii.

In 1956, Mink was elected to Hawaii’s territorial house of representatives. She served in the state senate, and in 1964 again made history when she was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives—the first woman of color and the first woman of Asian descent to serve in Congress.

In Mink’s memory, AAUW and the United Negro College Fund are

promoting an important new graduate fellowship program that encourages women and minorities to enter the professoriate. If passed, this new initiative will be called the “Patsy T. Mink Graduate Fellowship Program,” a fitting honor for a woman who spent her life advancing equity in education for women and minorities.

Mink is celebrated especially for her role as the “mother” of Title IX, the federal law prohibiting gender discrimination in education. She tirelessly championed the rights of women, children, minorities, and immigrants. In recognition of her significant contributions toward equal rights, Congress commissioned a portrait of Mink for the United States Capitol and renamed the Title IX Amendment of the Higher Education Act, the Patsy T. Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act. This woman’s indomitable spirit inspired all who met her. In the end, the greatest tribute to Mink is the millions of women and girls who now ponder futures that once seemed impossible—women who, like Patsy Mink before them, are now changing the world. ♻️



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