

May 10, 2023

Report of the Ossining Village Historian

RE: Honorary Street naming application for Hon. Sandra "Sandy" Galef submitted by the Village of Ossining

I researched Sandra "Sandy" Galef's contributions to the Village by consulting the following sources: interviews with Sandy Galef, her children Graig and Gwen, and Richard Wishnie, Commissioner of Emergency Services. I referenced several newspaper articles, her bio, and a report written by Trustee Dana White (attached below).

RESIDENCY IN OSSINING

A resident of Eastchester in 1968, Sandy and her husband Steve were looking to move. A friend purchased a house in Ossining, struck by the Hudson River and the new library (which is no longer standing), and they decided to look here as well. During Christmas of 1969, they purchased a house in Ossining, where she lives today. Sandy worked as a teacher in a little red schoolhouse in Virginia and then Scarsdale until she became pregnant with her first child, Graig. She had to stop teaching because women, at that time, were encouraged not to be around students during pregnancy so they did not have to explain the "condition." She continued to work with students as a tutor until she had her second child, Gwen. Sandy and Steve's children received their education in the Ossining School District.

Sandy's local office was located at 2 Church Street.

VILLAGE CONTRIBUTIONS

This commitment started in school in Westchester County, where she has lived since 1944 as a resident of Mamaroneck, White Plains, Eastchester, and Ossining. Assemblywoman Galef was born Sandra Risk in Lacrosse, Wisconsin, in May 1940. After moving to Westchester, she attended schools in Mamaroneck and White Plains. She graduated from White Plains High School with honors and was class secretary.

She then attended Purdue University and was again elected class secretary and president of her sorority. After graduating from Purdue, she received a Master's Degree in Education at the University of Virginia while teaching in Charlottesville.

She next worked in the Scarsdale school system as a teacher and subsequently left to raise her two children. During this period, she was fully involved in organizing and serving numerous community agencies and advocating for community needs.

Her volunteer leadership activities have included- being president League of Women Voters of Briarcliff-Ossining; trustee of Ossining Public Library; president and 16-year board member of United Way of Northern Westchester; board of directors Visiting Nurse Service of Westchester; president of National Council of Jewish Women, Westchester - Evening Section; board of directors, Phelps Hospital Robin's Nest Day Care Center; board of directors, Westchester Municipal Planning Federation; board member, Phelps Memorial Hospital Center; board member, Bethel Nursing Home; board member, Westchester Medical Center Children's Hospital Foundation; board member of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education Foundation; and board member Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO).

In asking Sandy why she ran for County Legislator, she said, "When I was with the United Way, I was asking the County Board of Legislators for money all the time for different causes. Well, if I am on the County Board, I can help get that money directed to good causes. It dawned on me to be there was more important than being the advocate on the outside."

In 1992, Assemblywoman Galef was elected to the New York State Assembly. Her district covered the Towns of Cortlandt, Ossining, Kent, Philipstown, and the City of Peekskill. She chaired the Real Property Tax Committee and served as a member of the Corporations, Authorities, and Commissions Committee; the Election Law Committee; the Governmental Operations Committee; and the Health Committee. Galef also serves on the Assembly Majority Steering Committee and the Hudson Valley Greenway Communities Council. Former Assembly leadership positions include Chair of the Libraries and Education Technology Committee, Vice Chair of the New York Legislative Women's Caucus, and Chair of the Subcommittee for Rural Health.

Galef was a leading advocate for legislative reform in Albany as well as being deeply involved in matters pertaining to education, tax reduction, government efficiency, environmental/clean energy issues, consumer issues, health, voting rights, organ donation, the disability community, and senior citizens, among other causes.

Before becoming a member of the New York State Assembly, Galef served as a Westchester County Legislator for thirteen years, eight of them as minority leader of the Board of Legislators. She also served as president of the New York State Association of Counties and Chair of the Welfare and Medicaid Steering Committee.

On the national level, Assemblywoman Galef served as chair of the Labor and Employee Benefits Steering Committee for the National Association of Counties. She was awarded a fellowship for the Eastern Leadership Academy at the University of Pennsylvania Fels Institute of Government from the Council of State Governments.

As Assemblywoman, she hosted two local television programs, "Speak out with Sandy Galef" and "Dear Sandy," about local and state initiatives and programs.

She offered unpaid summer internships to high school and college students interested in government and politics. The program was designed not only to teach interns new skills and concepts but will also to enhance the ones they already have.

Today, although retired, Sandy continues to support and inspire future leaders, especially women entering the political arena.

SIGNAGE HISTORY OF PROPOSED STREET: currently, there is no honorary street signage at Church Street and Highland Avenue. The applicant requests the honorary street name, "Sandy Galef Place"

Learn more of Sandy's life in this write-up by Ossining Village Trustee, Dana White when Sandy was given the Legacy Award by the Westchester Democratic Party in 2023.

2023 Legacy Award

Hon. Sandy Galef

Since the second grade, when she ran for student council at the Mamaroneck Avenue School, Sandy Galef has been a public servant. For forty-three years, she represented the people of Westchester County and parts of Putnam with bipartisanship, integrity and class, first as Westchester County Legislator from 1980 to 1992, then as a New York State Assemblywoman for ten terms, from 1993 to 2022. Along the way she has supported and enriched the lives of her constituents, including her home town of Ossining, mentored a new generation of female politicians and always stood up for what's right.

But the Covid 19 pandemic made lots of people reconsider their life path, and Sandy was no exception. As public appearances were cancelled and meetings shifted to Zoom, the Assemblywoman realized she didn't mind slowing down. The timing to retire from politics seemed right. At 82, Sandy was determined to leave on her own terms.

"I wanted to go out on a high. I'd won my elections. And Covid got me in the mood for not being as busy.... I wasn't going to Albany and life got a little bit simpler, and I kind of liked it."

She was born Sandra Risk in Lacrosse, Wisc., moving with her family to Mamaroneck around World War II when her father got a job with Mobil Oil. Sandy met her future husband, Steven Galef, in the ninth grade; both ran for office at White Plains High School: "Public service was part of who we were." They did not start dating until college, when Sandy was at Purdue. While her masters' degree in education, she taught second graders in a rural school in Virginia while Steve studied for his law degree at the University of Virginia. They married in 1963 and moved back to Westchester, first Eastchester and then Ossining in 1969.

While Steve worked as a lawyer at a Manhattan firm, Sandy left teaching to raise their two children, Graig and Gwen, and perform volunteer work for countless community organizations, from the United Way to the Ossining Library board. She learned about municipal issues as President of the League of Women Voters of Briarcliff/Ossining, which she called her political training ground. "I always tell people that it's so helpful when you have community organizations that you've been involved with to start out. That way people get to know you in a different light."

She resigned the post in 1975, when Steve ran for County Legislator. He was a Republican (as was Sandy). It was at a time when the Republican Party dominated county politics, so with the field crowded, as Sandy recalls, "He said, 'I think I'll be a Democrat. They have a hard time finding candidates.'" He switched parties and Sandy ran his winning "Republicans for Steve Galef" campaign," winning in an upset.

Due to work pressures, Steve did not pursue a third term in 1979, and leaders of both parties asked Sandy to run for his open seat. She demurred at first until a friend told her, "Sandy, if you ever going to get into politics, you should do it now because your name is out there. I said, 'Okay, I'll give it a try. I don't know if I'll like it or not.'"

She liked it, and went on to serve six and a half more terms, rising to Democratic minority leader in 1984, and encountering more than a little sexism along the way. "I'd knock on doors and people would be like, 'Shouldn't you be home with your children?' I was this little housewife."

In 1992, George Pataki left the Assembly to run for State Senate, and Sandy decided to run for the redrawn Assembly district. The kids were older, Steve was busy working in the city, and she was more comfortable spending time in Albany. "It was the Year of the Woman, and I was getting all these phone calls: you really gotta get in it."

She got in it. She won and she kept on winning, but at first, life in the Assembly wasn't all flowers and balloons. Sandy came in urging reform, but no one was listening, and her discontent grew.

"It was the system. There was one time I came home from Albany and I said to Steve, 'I don't even know why I'm here. They just want my yes vote.... I'm the elected official; I should have more influence in the government than the staff or lobbyists.'"

In 1997, the Westchester County Executive seat opened up when Andy O'Rourke decided not to run for reelection. Sandy threw her hat in the ring. Then Steve, already suffering from Parkinson's Disease, fell ill with esophageal cancer, and she withdrew.

For a year, with the help of friends, she juggled politics and Steve's medical condition. The last budget season before his death, she rented an apartment for them in Albany so she could care for him while still performing her duties in the Assembly. "There were bills being done and they needed my vote. It was very, very tough." Steve passed away in June of 1998, only 58 years old.

Newly widowed, Sandy decided that if she was going to stay in the Assembly, "then I was going to change it."

The former Assemblywoman may be soft-spoken and easy-going, with a musical laugh, but make no mistake: Sandy Galef does not shrink from a fight. As County Legislator she blasted Andrew O'Rourke for the lack of women on his committees. And In 2001, she was one of 20 Democrats who tried to oust the Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver over his iron-fisted rule and lack of transparency.

Silver prevailed, but retaliated. "I would get up to speak and he would turn his back to me. He couldn't tolerate me; I don't know why. Maybe because I was a 'soft, strong' woman." She and Silver did eventually patch things up. (He was arrested for corruption in 2015, dying in prison last year.)

As a former Republican herself, Sandy had a knack for reaching across the aisle. “I had Republicans standing up supporting my bills. That was always the thing that I did.... I learned you can be strong in a way that doesn’t offend everybody else and set all the alarms off.”

Using this “no bridge burned” approach, Sandy sponsored successful legislation making the State constitution gender neutral. “It was controversial. Upstate people were like, What does this woman from Westchester know?” She also convinced Albany to transition away from paper documents to digital, though it took some convincing. “I just kept talking about it. Kept working it. And eventually, people changed their views.”

Her last piece of legislation allows anyone, not just clergy, to perform a marriage ceremony in New York State. Governor Hochul signed it into law on December 28, 2022.

Now that she doesn’t have to be in Albany from January to June, Sandy plans to travel, as she and Steve used to do; learning new things, sit on some boards, support local causes, spend time with her grandchildren and tend to her beautiful garden. This slower life agrees with her. “People used to stop me in the supermarket to ask questions about the issues. Now they ask me, How’s retirement?”

And she laughs her wonderful laugh.

In 1985, Graig Galef wrote a tongue-in-cheek essay for the Ossining High School newspaper lamenting his role as a political son. It later ran in Citizen Register; here is an excerpt.

It was the first Tuesday of November when I was in third grade that my life began to change. It was (dread the words) Election Day. On this day, the people chose my father to be county legislator, and my classmates began to know me as “the son of a politician.”

I must admit that this first campaign was not such a disaster. My friends were not yet at the age where wearing a “Steve Galef for County Legislator” T-shirt was not “cool”

Life remained close to normal for the next four years, compared to the dramatic change it made the same dreaded night in the seventh grade. For it was this night that I lost my mother to politics. Sandy Galef became the people’s county legislator.... From this day on, I was not known as Graig Galef the tennis player or the prep... I was now the son of Sandy Galef.

When peers hear my name for the first time, they immediately inquire, “Is Sandy Galef your mother?” On the first day of each school year I am asked this same question by my teachers... Each night I receive phone calls from parents with questions for my mother.

The balloon blowing up parties, in which we fill my living room with hundreds of balloons, occur during each campaign. Every year at the firemen’s parade we line

the sidewalks with “Sandy Galef for County Legislator” balloons. Whenever I drove the car, with the “Sandy Galef for County Legislator” car top on the roof, the windshield ended up with sausage wedge on it...

Well, for any of you who take pleasure in thinking my parents have ruined my life, I have some bad news. There are some advantages to being the child of a politician, the most important of which is the reserved parking space my mother has at the County Office Building next door to the Galleria.