



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 19, 2010

Mildred Jefferson, Battler for the Right to Life

There were so many meritorious achievements in the life and career of Mildred Fay Jefferson that even the comprehensive New York Times obituary didn't mention all of them. But the Times, to its credit, put first things first and began the story as follows: "Dr. Mildred Jefferson, a prominent outspoken opponent of abortion...."



There was more, of course, much more about Dr. Jefferson, who died last Friday at her Cambridge home at age 84. But those few words encapsulate so much of what moved that physically small woman's huge heart and formidable mind, her eloquent tongue and her passionate devotion to the cause that defined her in the public arena for the last nearly 40 years of her life. The phrase "opponent of abortion" states the case in negative terms, but the negative is essential to the picture. She opposed abortion because she believed, ethically, morally, and religiously, in the right to life of every human being, from conception to natural death. Her devotion to that principle was tireless, but never tiring.

I heard her speak a number of times, and each time the message was fresh and new — a message older than the law of Moses and as current as the morning newspaper and the evening news. "Would you believe," she said in a talk in Methuen, Massachusetts, a few years ago, "that now in our country you may actually go to an emergency room and not be treated for your injuries because someone has decided that you have lived long enough? Or that it's not worth spending the money on you, your insurance will not cover enough of it?" As the baby boomers reach retirement and the number of young paying into Social Security and Medicare keep shrinking, she warned, the balance between the demand and supply of life-sustaining medical care will increase pressure for putting the balance sheet ahead of the lives of the poor and elderly. People may defend the sanctity of life for spiritual and humanitarian reasons, she said. "Or you can just be selfish and realize that if you aren't going to do it, you are going to pay the price."

Born in Pittsburg, Texas, in 1926, Mildred Jefferson graduated from Texas College in Tyler, Texas, and earned a master's degree from Tufts University. In 1951, at age 25, she became the first Negro woman — the term she always insisted on — to graduate from Harvard Medical School. Her other groundbreaking achievements include becoming the first female member of the Boston Surgical Society



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and the first woman to be a surgical intern at Boston City Hospital. She was also the first woman to receive the prestigious Lantern Award for Patriotism from the Massachusetts Council of the Knights of Columbus.

Her training and her practice as a physician contributed greatly to her passion for the defense of life. The 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* that proclaimed abortion to be a constitutional right, "gave my profession an almost unlimited license to kill," she testified before Congress in 1981. It was a license she very much wanted revoked.

"With the obstetrician and mother becoming the worst enemy of the child and the pediatrician becoming the assassin for the family," she went on to say, "the state must be enabled to protect the life of the child, born and unborn."

She was a founding member of the National Right to Life committee and served for three terms as its president. She played a leading role in Massachusetts Citizens for Life, was a member of Black Americans for Life, and was held a hero to Feminists for Life and by pro-life feminists.

Dr. Jefferson was an authentic patriot. Her love of her country, evident in every speech, was bound up in her support for the right to life and liberty — two rights that, as another Jefferson said, are eternally joined as one. The words inscribed in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. include the following: "God who gave us life, gave liberty at the same time; the hand of force may crush but can never disjoin them."

When describing the deteriorating respect for life in a nation where an estimated 4,000 babies are aborted every day, Dr. Jefferson would often say: "We cannot let them do this to our America." Her love of life and country were captured in the following words, quoted in a 2003 profile in *The American Feminist*, a pro-life magazine: "I am at once a physician, a citizen and a woman, and I am not willing to stand aside and allow this concept of expendable human lives to turn this great land of ours into just another exclusive reservation where only the perfect, the privileged and the planned have the right to live."

With its declining birth rate and more than one million babies aborted each year, she warned, America was heading toward a virtual extinction. Yet through all her dire warnings and unhappy descriptions of what was happening to millions of infants who bore the image of their Creator, Dr. Jefferson always radiated in her own person a joy in living, a zest for life that included, among other things, a love of baseball. She did not let life's little pleasures pass unheeded even as she remained focused on the battle for life — a battle, she insisted, that was also a fight for America's survival as a nation.

That joy and her undeniable tenacity were rooted in her deep Christian faith. The daughter of a Methodist minister, she liked to refer to herself, even in her advanced years, as "a preacher's kid." Her faith made her an optimist, no matter how dark the outlook may have appeared to others who shared her concern about the legally sanctioned destruction of life in America.

She had, until the end, "great hope for the future" not only of America, but for the world, she said, because Jesus came "not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. And I know if we take that message and remember that the weakest, most helpless among us are the key to our survival, then we won't have to worry about this great United State becoming extinct."



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