

I REMEMBER

ROSALYNN CARTER

In 1997, I met Rosalynn Carter twice: once in Washington, where I hosted a reception in her honour staged by the World Federation for Mental Health, and again a few weeks later at the Carter Center in Atlanta for a one-hour sit-down with this magnificent woman and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter.

Her dedication to mental health – improving care and treatment, advancing journalism’s knowledge of the subject, authoring a book, improving mental-health care among Third World countries – ran deep and unyielding.

On the first occasion, we sat together much of the evening and I had the opportunity to appreciate the substance of her commitment to a field of need ignored and underprivileged in funds available for research and care not only in poor countries but in the United States itself.



Former first lady Rosalynn Carter and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter share a moment at their home in Plains, Ga., in September, 2017.

DUSTIN CHAMBERS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

As she rose to leave, I pushed my luck and asked if I we might continue our discussion at the Carter Center. “Of course, with Jimmy too.”

My wife, Olga, and I entered the main door of the Carter Center, then a hallway, a few steps more, a door opens, out steps Mr. Carter who raises both arms in a wonderfully welcoming gesture, his famous smile fully aloft. “So nice of you to come,” the former president said, and in a second or two, Ms. Carter was at our side, her natural warmth fully in evidence.

We walked together to his office. Olga and I took our place on a two-seater couch, Ms. Carter sat close-up on one side, Mr. Carter on the other. We discussed the purposes of the centre, Mr. Carter’s travel plans, Ms. Carter’s role at the centre.

Then, I asked a question I wasn’t sure I should ask. “Looking back, sir, what has it meant to

your country that president Reagan took office and you didn’t as the eighties dawned?” His smile widened. But before he spoke, Ms. Carter commanded the conversation.

“It has meant suffering for many more than would have suffered if Jimmy was still there.” Ms. Carter leaned in. She spoke of a country without her husband in the White House that was “poorer in a lot of ways.”

She was warm-hearted, compassionate, smart, dedicated to “Jimmy” – and in her political appraisal of the Reagan presidency, in contrast to what she saw of her husband’s, we were witness to Rosalynn Carter, the Steel Magnolia, a tough-minded woman who expressed her opinions determinedly and with clarity.

Bill Wilkerson, chairman emeritus, Mental Health International, Port Hope, Ont.

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