

## **Betty Ford: Defining the American Spirit** by Carter Jimenez Jenkins

Refreshing. Sassy. Iconoclastic.

Betty Ford, an embattled mastectomy survivor and alcoholic, was a First Lady the nation will never forget. With her outspoken irreverence, she defined what it meant to be American. “Mrs. Ford's impact on American culture may be far wider and more lasting than that of her husband, who served a mere 896 days, much of it spent trying to restore the dignity of the office of the president,” *The New York Times* wrote. Betty may have looked like an elegantly coiffed First Lady, but she did the Bump dance down the White House corridors, flashed her mood ring, and adopted the handle “First Mama” when she chatted on her CB radio. In an era where women were praised for their domesticity, Betty fought for women’s rights and “mused about drugs, abortion and premarital sex aloud and without regret” (*The New York Times*). She was adamantly pro-choice, in favor of psychiatric treatment, and opened the door to frank conversations about marijuana and premarital sex. In an era where men and women slept in separate beds, she showed the nation in a televised White House tour that she and Jerry enjoyed the same one. Although some conservatives blasted her as “No Lady” and rallied for her “resignation,” seventy-five percent of Americans cheered her on. Betty said all the things we lacked the courage to speak out loud, and we loved her for it.

She was not empty fire and sass. Her words saved lives, especially when it came to breast cancer and addiction. Because Betty Ford went public with her mastectomy, women increased their rates of self-examination. This practice led to increased rates of early breast cancer detection, the “Betty Ford Blip,” which consequently rescued lives. In addition, the drug and alcohol rehab clinic that bears her name saves people to this day.

Despite all she achieved, Betty was humble: “I was an ordinary woman who was called onstage at an extraordinary time. I was no different once I became First Lady than I had been before. But, through an accident of history, I became interesting to people.” It was no accident that Betty shaped not who we were, but who we would be. Betty once said, “You never know what you can do until you have to do it.” She is a woman who defined the American spirit.