

Eleanor Roosevelt

Few have matched Eleanor Roosevelt's passion for political, social and economic justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: *"The impact of her personality and its unwavering devotion to high principle and purpose cannot be contained in a single day or era."* As First Lady, Eleanor prodded her husband and his advisors to make the New Deal better serve women and minorities. She travelled across the country to bear witness to the suffering of the poor, advocated for projects in Appalachia and worked closely with early Civil Rights leaders.



Though born into wealth, her childhood was a struggle. By age ten, both her parents had died and she spent the next several years living a lonely existence with her grandmother. In 1899, Eleanor was sent to study in London, a godsend for the young woman. There she made friends and found a mentor in the headmistress of the school, social reformer Marie Souvestre, and achieved a degree of happiness.

Eleanor returned to the United States in 1902 and soon began working for settlement houses that provided living quarters and social services for poor families. She began dating Franklin Roosevelt, a distant cousin, and both were greatly influenced by the poverty they witnessed in the city. Over the next ten years, the couple married and had one daughter and five sons. Domestic life did not entirely suit Eleanor, and she later said of this period that she was *"simply absorbing the personalities of those about me and letting their tastes and interests dominate me."* In subsequent years, Eleanor slowly but surely returned to an active life in the social justice movement.



Eleanor Roosevelt and her husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933, Eleanor came into her own as a public figure. She filled the role of First Lady as no one had before nor has since. She held press conferences, authored a long-running op-ed column, "My Day," and toured the country to become *"an advocate of the rights and needs of the poor, of minorities, and of the disadvantaged."* She took her ideas and

experiences to the president (she would leave reading materials by his bedside), prodded him to action, and significantly influenced the direction of the New Deal.

Especially concerned with younger Americans, Eleanor wrote: *"I have moments of real terror when I think we might be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into the active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary."* She played an instrumental role in the creation of the National Youth Administration (NYA), to provide work and education for millions of young men and women. Aubrey Williams, program director, wrote: *"One of the NYA's ablest and wisest friends was Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt... Her unfailing interest, her deep and sympathetic understanding of the problems of youth, and her endless courage were a source of great strength and guidance to the NYA, to the youth on its program, and to the youth of America."*



- *"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control".* - **Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Eleanor led the drafting of this document.**
- *"It takes courage to love, but pain through love is the purifying fire which those who love generously know. We all know people who are so much afraid of pain that they shut themselves up like clams in a shell and, giving out nothing, receive nothing and therefore shrink until life is a mere living death."* - **"My Day", April 1939**
- Eleanor Roosevelt [writes about](#) her 15th birthday and her experiences as a young girl.
 - Full [Collection](#) of Eleanor Roosevelt's 1936 - 1962 *My Day* columns.