

Frances Hesselbein, Progressive Leader of the Girl Scouts, Dies at 107

Widely cited as a model of leadership, she took the scouts out of “the Betty Crocker era,” halting a membership decline and recruiting minority girls.



By Richard Sandomir

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Frances Hesselbein, a transformative chief executive of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. who in the 1970s and '80s arrested a membership decline and ushered the group into a modern, diverse era, died on Dec. 11 at her home in Easton, Pa. She was 107.

The Girl Scouts announced her death on their website.

Ms. Hesselbein took control of the Girl Scouts' national office in Manhattan in 1976 after a quarter-century of involvement with that nonprofit group, starting as a reluctant troop leader. Her stature as an innovative leader prompted the management guru Peter F. Drucker to tell *Businessweek* magazine in 1990 that she would be a worthy successor to the retiring Roger Smith as chief executive of General Motors, because of her ability to turn around a large bureaucracy.

“She was incredibly focused on the Girl Scouts' mission,” Marshall Goldsmith, a prominent leadership coach and a friend of Ms. Hesselbein's, said in a phone interview. “She came up with a model called ‘Tradition With a Future.’ The Girl Scouts weren't moving into the new world at all. She brought inclusivity and diversity, but she never put down or insulted the past.”

Helping girls reach their greatest potential remained the organization's mission under Ms. Hesselbein (pronounced HESS-el-bine), but she also saw that the Girl Scouts needed a makeover. What had once thrived with a largely white, middle-class membership had faded with the social and political convulsions of the 1960s and the blossoming of feminism as more women went to work.

Ms. Hesselbein set out to diversify the membership. She added management training for its volunteers and paid staff. She hired the designers Halston and Bill Blass to design new uniforms. She added activities for the girls steeped in math, science and technology. She also upended the organization's hierarchical management structure to one that placed her at the middle of a hub, to accelerate the flow of information to the independent local councils that are chartered by the Girl Scouts' national office.

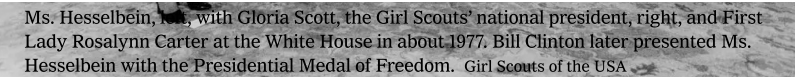
In 1984, Ms. Hesselbein created a new and younger tier of Girl Scouts: the Daisies, for kindergartners and first graders, a level below the Brownies.

“It seemed a logical step for us and of critical importance for the American family,” she told *The New York Times* when the Daisies were announced. “When you look at all the single-parent households, the Girl Scouts can be almost indispensable.”

The overhaul worked. Membership rose to 2.3 million in 1990, according to *Businessweek*. Recruitment efforts increased minority membership to 15.5 percent. Ms. Hesselbein launched a project to help scouts learn about as many as 95 career opportunities, and started programs in telecommunications and marine biology that were designed to be done at home or at troop meetings.

“The era before Frances we call ‘the Betty Crocker Era,’ where the girls turned to conforming to what was appropriate for girls to do, and so they earned cooking badges,” Tamara Woodbury, the former chief executive of the Girl Scouts—Arizona Cactus-Pine Council, said in a phone interview. Ms. Woodbury, who met Ms. Hesselbein when she was a teenage Girl Scout, added, “She wanted the Girl Scouts to be a place where girls could push outside the boundaries and not conform to social norms.”





Ms. Hesselbein, left, with Gloria Scott, the Girl Scouts' national president, right, and First Lady Rosalynn Carter at the White House in about 1977. Bill Clinton later presented Ms. Hesselbein with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Girl Scouts of the USA

Ms. Hesselbein retired from the Girl Scouts in 1990 but started a new career of training executives. In 1998, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, from Bill Clinton. The citation read in part, "With skill and sensitivity, Frances Hesselbein has shown us how to summon the best from ourselves and our fellow citizens."

In 2015, Fortune Magazine ranked her 37th in its list of the world's 50 greatest leaders, ahead of Jamie Dimon, the chief executive of JPMorgan Chase.

Frances Willard Richards was born on Nov. 1, 1915, in South Fork, Pa., and grew up in nearby Johnstown. Her father, Burgess, was a Pennsylvania state trooper. Her mother, Anne (Luke) Richards, was a homemaker. Frances attended junior college at the University of Pittsburgh's campus in Johnstown, but when her father died she dropped out after six weeks to go to work.

She married John Hesselbein in the late 1930s, and they opened a commercial photography studio in Johnstown that also made educational and promotional films. In 1950, when their son, John, was 8, Ms. Hesselbein was pressed by a neighbor to replace the departing leader of a local Girl Scout troop.

"I explained that I didn't know anything about little girls," she said in an oral history project at Indiana University in 2011. "I had a little boy."

She agreed to fill in for six weeks, but stayed for eight years.

"It was the greatest leadership training I ever had," she added. "You can't work with a group of 30 little girls, 10 years old, and talk about the values and have them respond, and not live them."

Over the next two decades she held various posts with the Girl Scouts until she was named national executive director in 1976. (The title was later changed to chief executive.)

In 1984, she helped weather a crisis when pins were widely reported to have been found in Girl Scout cookies, the product so central to the organization's identity and finances. The F.B.I. investigated 500 complaints but could not substantiate any, and the F.D.A. found no evidence of tampering.

"We have sold billions of cookies safely in this country for the past 48 years, and we are confident that the cookie sales will continue," Ms. Hesselbein told The Times. "I am confident that the American public is not going to permit anything like this to stop the cookie drive."

The next year, cookie sales and membership decreased slightly, but recovered well in 1986 and continued to rise, she said.

After retiring from the Girl Scouts in 1990, Ms. Hesselbein and Mr. Drucker founded the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management, which nurtured innovation by bringing nonprofit and corporate executives and military officers together with leading thinkers, educators and consultants. The name was later changed to the Leader to Leader Institute and then the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute.

In 2017, the institute moved to the University of Pittsburgh and became the Francis Hesselbein Leadership Forum, offering a lecture series and executive coaching program.

Ms. Hesselbein — whose motto was "to serve is to live" — remained active with the forum, particularly as co-editor in chief of its publication, Leader to Leader. In its most recent issue, she and Sarah McArthur, the other editor in chief, reflected on leadership in divided political times.

"In the end, we believe that it is the quality and character of us as leaders that will determine the performance and results of our teams, our organizations, even our countries," they wrote. They listed best practices for leaders, among them: "Have respect for all people" and "Consider, as a leader, if we can't control ourselves, how can we be expected to control other people?"

Ms. Hesselbein wrote and edited several books, including "Hesselbein on Leadership" (2002) and "My Life in Leadership" (2011).

She is survived by a grandson, three great-grandchildren and three great-great grandchildren. Her son, John, died in 2011.

Mr. Goldsmith, the leadership coach, recalled conducting a program in 2006 for retiring chief executives, a group that included Alan Mulally, who had recently left Boeing and would later lead Ford Motor.

"Some were whining, 'What am I going to do? I'm not sure I'll find something interesting,'" he said in the phone interview. "And Frances said, 'Maybe you should think about serving other people instead of yourselves and you'll have plenty to do.' The whining was up."