

MARC FISHER: KATHARINE GRAHAM NEVER LOST SIGHT OF HER CITY

By Marc Fisher
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When Katharine Graham entered the newsroom to ask an editor about a story, anyone remotely connected with that story immediately reached for something more. She was one tough lady.

I was the paper's correspondent in Germany when Mrs. Graham came to Bonn to interview Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Kohl was notoriously long-winded, and we knew we would squeeze in only a handful of questions. By tradition, Mrs. Graham would start off, usually with a softball to set the subject at ease. But she was having none of that: In our strategy session, she said: "There's no time for one of my jackass fool questions. What do we need to know from him?" She questioned Kohl energetically, and of the six journalists in the room, she was the only one brave enough to interrupt the chancellor, which she did repeatedly, until he stopped dancing around her question.

Tough — but also one gracious, disarming lady. When deputy national editor Ruth Marcus's book club read Mrs. Graham's autobiography, several of the women asked Marcus if she could somehow persuade the author to visit their group. Marcus sent a note upstairs and one day later got the answer: Yes, of course.

Marcus cleaned out her car, picked up Mrs. Graham and drove her to upper Northwest, where Marcus led the most accomplished businesswoman of the century up the steps and into ... the wrong house. The startled residents of a house on Jenifer Street NW looked up and said, "Oh, Mrs. Graham, so glad to meet you."

Marcus remains mortified three years later. Mrs. Graham "completely let it pass," Marcus said. "And when we got to the right place, she stayed at this book group like you wouldn't believe," talking to the women as if she'd known them for decades.

Mrs. Graham was so modest in manner that even hardened reporters were awed by her occasional

ripping displays of moral authority. When Chinese security agents searched Post correspondent Lena Sun's office in Beijing in 1992, confiscating her personal papers, Mrs. Graham went to the Chinese Embassy on Connecticut Avenue on a Sunday in her pearls and banged on the door until someone would see her.

She was not a fiery speaker, and until she wrote her book — in her own hand on long yellow pads — she hadn't written much. She spoke with her newspaper — sending reporters around the region, nation and globe, not because it made money, but because it is what a newspaper is supposed to do. She spoke with her money — breathing life into many of Washington's theaters, musical groups and museums, great and small. She spoke with her presence — of all the events The Post sponsored, Mrs. Graham never missed the awards for superb teachers.

Most essentially, she spoke with her decency. Ike Fulwood, Washington's chief of police a few years back, saw grace in Mrs. Graham. "Here was a woman who had made decisions about the Pentagon Papers, about Watergate, but she always had this passion about what happened to the children in this city," he said.

"This was her city and she wanted it to be a good place," said Maurice Sykes, the former deputy school superintendent who worked with Mrs. Graham when she raised money for an early childhood center in Southeast. "With all the wealth and all the power, she could relate to those children on Stanton Road. She was compelled by the disparity in resources."

Two weeks ago, investigative reporter Sari Horwitz ran into Mrs. Graham in front of the Post building. "She stopped me and asked what I was working on," Horwitz recalls, "and I wasn't even sure she knew who I was." Horwitz told her about her reporting following up on the brutal death of foster child Brianna Blackmond. Mrs. Graham said: "You know, that's very important. Stories about children are really very important to me."

And the woman who met with kings and weekended with presidents and socialized with princesses offered to give the city reporter a lift, because for all her stature, what she really cared about was the city her paper covered, the children who could not do for themselves, the minds and hearts that needed a boost. Katharine Graham's legacy is not the power she wielded or the company she built so much as the stories that will appear in these pages next week and next month and next year, stories that open eyes, right wrongs and teach us all.