

Libby Holman (1904-1971)

Libby Holman Schanker tragically committed suicide on June 18, 1971.

She was one of the strongest women we have ever met. Her high-profile life was filled with many challenges and yet they only seemed to make her even stronger.

In addition to her successful singing/acting career she was an activist involved in many of the struggles of her era. The untimely death of her husband, Zachary Smith Reynolds, in 1932, prompted her to become a strong gun safety advocate. She supported the young Martin Luther King Jr. and others involved in the civil rights and gay rights movements. Libby was also politically active and fought for the rights of soldiers returning home from serving in Vietnam. She was especially empathetic with the mothers who had lost their sons due to the war. (Libby's son "Topper" died at the age of seventeen in a mountain climbing accident.) She later established the Christopher Reynolds Foundation in his name.

Libby battled depression all her adult life but seemed to have it under control. The unfortunate events during the latter part of the 1960's took its toll on her. The deaths of friends, Montgomery Clift, Martin Luther King Jr., John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and the derailments of the McCarthy and McGovern presidential campaigns affected her greatly. She was also dealing with the recent death of longtime friend and lawyer, Benet Polikoff, still coping with the loss of her older sister, Marion, and the deteriorating health of her good friend Jane Bowles.

Around this time, she became aware that a new book, again sensationalizing her past and others involved in her life, was being written. Libby was accustomed to dealing with fictitious stories about her, many from people who did not agree with her strong social and political views. She knew of this author's reputation and would not afford him an interview. In retaliation he attempted to not only intimidate Libby, but also her family, friends, and staff, who would not meet with him. Libby felt responsible for them having to go through this because of her. This very greatly added to her stress and worsened her health condition.

These accumulating factors drove her, despite her valiant efforts and those of others concerned for her, such as good friends, Coretta Scott King, and Olga Hirshhorn, to give into her depression and take her own life. Her husband, artist Louis Schanker, with the help of staff, had been able to save her during two previous suicide attempts. They unfortunately couldn't prevent her third attempt. Libby left a recording thanking Schanker and others for their efforts in trying to help her through her difficult times. She expressed her love for him and sons Timmy and Tony, asking for their forgiveness in not being able to fight her depression any longer.

Libby's whole life was very turbulent, yet she was able to keep her depression under control. She was a fighter. We must all be on guard for signs and encourage those who are suffering to seek the help they need. Libby was a very private person. We feel however, she would have wanted us to pass this on if it might be of some help to others.

Lou and Flo Siegel

