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The Meaning of Leadership Today

In the conservative era during the 70s, where diseases and addictions were taboo to discuss, one woman used her political power and “spotlight” to make people aware of the dangers of breast cancer and substance abuse. Mrs. Betty Ford, wife of the late President Gerald R. Ford, continues to be upheld as a leader and advocate in Grand Rapids and as well as the United States. With passion and determination, Mrs. Ford created public awareness for both of her causes through zealous stories of her personal struggle with alcoholism and her mastectomy.

Along with speaking to the public about her own experiences, she also spoke out about Women’s Rights and equal pay. As a strong-minded female with dreams of becoming a successful author and opinion columnist, I have Mrs. Ford to thank for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts with the world. I’ve always had an admiration for leading women who’ve spoken out in an era where their opinions have caused an evolution in how our society runs today. I feel a personal connection with Mrs. Ford because she’s a role model for young women in Grand Rapids by proving that even a small town citizen has the power to make others listen. As I gain more maturity and life experience, I aim to have the courage to defy society’s norms and create a legacy as the late First Lady has.

Leaders throughout history have not only exhibited entrancing speaking skills, but have supported their words with actions. In 1982, Mrs. Ford co-founded the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage, California. This non-profit organization has become a safe haven for people who have battled drug and alcohol addiction. Still running today, the Center is providing treatments and helping addicts decrease their dependence on dangerous substances. Mrs. Betty Ford has displayed the true qualities of a leader by keeping her ideas alive even after death. My grandfather struggled with alcoholism through most of his life, which led to divorce and a fractured relationship with my mom. It gives me relief to know that broken families can receive treatment in an accepting environment.

Only forty years ago breast cancer was referred to as a death sentence and was deemed impossible to cure. The former First Lady was one of the first diagnosed patients to share her experience in 1974. Because of her “First Lady” title, several newspapers and magazines printed her stories; waves of women were inspired by what Mrs. Ford had to say and scheduled their mammograms. It also made the public realize that breast cancer is a common and threatening disease (1 in 8 woman are affected) because if someone as idolized as Mrs. Ford could be affected, so could anybody. Fast forward to the present and what do you see? Television commercials, “pink” insignia products, and even a Betty Ford Breast Care Services center in downtown Grand Rapids. Both my best friend’s mom and great aunt were diagnosed with breast cancer, and possibly wouldn’t have survived without the medical treatments that are offered today.

Now in 2011, numerous minority groups are catching the public eye with their personal anecdotes and organizations. Parents of teenagers who have committed suicide because of bullying feel confident to share their grief and have been featured in magazines and on television. The Gay Rights movement has stormed into Congress, pushing for legal marriage rights. Mrs. Betty Ford was way ahead of her time by creatively utilizing the media, supporting her ideals through foundations and novels, and being confident enough to be vulnerable and personable with the American public. She is the emblem of what leaders today should demonstrate: having the courage to discuss radical topics, creating awareness that leads to change and inspiring followers.