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Description

Senator Ted Kennedy has died at the age of 77 after months of battling a brain tumor. NBC's Brian Williams looks back at the liberal stalwart's remarkable life and political career.

Keywords

The Life and Legacy of Senator Ted Kennedy

BRIAN WILLIAMS reporting:

From the looks of things it was a wonderful life. He was the son of the American Ambassador to Great Britain. The youngest of nine, he was the toast of the town in London at the age of six. He was a lucky young man and then his luck began to change. His childhood hero was his dashing older brother Joe, killed in a plane crash in World War II. His older sister Kathleen also died in a plane crash soon after the war. His brother Jack, the 35th president of the United States, killed by an assassin. So was his brother Bobby. His sister Rosemary was left incapacitated by a lobotomy. His sister Eunice died this summer. It wasn’t enough that the surviving brother Ted had to watch it all and endure it, but it was all public. We watched him through all of it.

DAVID BRINKLEY, reporting: Senator Edward Kennedy, Mrs. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy.

WILLIAMS: And no one watching the achingly sad coverage of President Kennedy’s funeral in November of ’63 would ever have dreamed that the Kennedy the next two American generations would come to know best would be Ted.

As the son of parents who moved around a lot, Ted Kennedy attended ten different schools by the time he was 11. He went to prep school then Harvard, he was good at football but bad behavior got him thrown out. After two years in the army he got back in, then went to law school, then the family business. He ran his brother’s presidential campaign in the western states before it was his turn.

Senator TED KENNEDY (Democrat, Massachusetts): And if you’re talking about too many Kennedys,
you should have talked to my mother and father at the time that they were getting started.

WILLIAMS: At the age of 30, Edward More Kennedy ran for his brother Jack’s old Senate seat where he won, despite being called out by his opponent on his qualifications.

Kennedy’s opponent: If his name was Edward More, with his qualifications, with you’re qualifications Ted, if it was Edward More, your candidacy would be a joke. But nobody’s laughing.

WILLIAMS: Early on in his Senate career his life almost came to an end.

ED HERLIHY, reporting: Misfortune strikes the Kennedy family once again.

WILLIAMS: Flying to a Democratic Party event in Massachusetts in bad weather his small plane crashed. Two passengers died, Kennedy survived with a broken back. He was pulled from the wreckage by fellow Senator Birch Bayh. He was laid up for eight months. He won reelection while recuperating but remained in chronic pain for the rest of his life.

Then came the public pain of his brother Bobby’s assassination.

KENNEDY: Those of us who loved him, and have take him to his rest today, pray that what he was to us, what he wished for others, will some day come to pass for all the world. As he said many times, in many parts of this nation, to those he touched, and who sought to touch him. Some men see things as they are and say why, I dream things that never were and say why not.

WILLIAMS: And if his younger years were marked by tragedy his later years would be marked by indiscretion. Chiefly Chappaquiddick, an island in Massachusetts, that became shorthand for the unreported death of a young woman, campaign aide Mary Jo Kopechne. He was found guilty only of leaving the scene of an accident. He went on national television to explain himself.

KENNEDY: All kinds of scrambled thoughts. All of them confused, some of them irrational. Many of them which I cannot recall. And some of which I would not have seriously entertained under normal circumstances went through my mind during this period.

WILLIAMS: In the years that followed in the Senate Ted Kennedy made a decision to bare down and do the work. He concentrated on running the decidedly unsexy Labor and Public Welfare Committee. It had a clunky name and yet it did the business that reached deep into American life, and Kennedy hired a world-class staff. Health care reform was always his long-term goal and his stem-winder of a speech to the party in 1978 today sounds like a preview of 2009.

KENNEDY: As long as I have a voice in the United States Senate, it’s going to be for that Democratic platform plank that provides decent quality health care North and South, East and West for all Americans as a matter of right and not a privilege.

WILLIAMS: His last hope for the presidency for himself died on the stage at the Democratic convention in 1980. He had challenged the incumbent president Jimmy Carter and lost. He went down swinging. He snubbed the president with a cursory handshake. Carter later lost to Reagan and Kennedy gave the speech of his life.

KENNEDY: The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die.

WILLIAMS: Again returning to his work in the Senate, Kennedy led the successful fight years later against Robert Bork, President Reagan’s choice for the Supreme Court. With high drama and hyperbole Kennedy attached mercilessly.
KENNEDY: Robert Bork’s America is a land in which women would be forced into back alley abortions.
WILLIAMS: Years later with Americans fighting and dying in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld got the same treatment.
KENNEDY: In baseball, its three strikes you’re out, what is it for the Secretary of Defense?
WILLIAMS: The man so often called “The Lion of the Senate,” and he was, was also a whale of a fundraiser for both parties. Democrats craved Kennedy’s endorsement and for the Republicans he was often the perfect target.
Commercial: Voted with Kennedy 85 percent of the time.
WILLIAMS: Kennedy’s home life was laced with sadness as well. His first wife, Joan, years ago acknowledged her battle with alcoholism. His son Ted Junior lost a leg to cancer; his daughter Kara underwent surgery for lung cancer, his son Patrick, a Congressman, has battled substance abuse.
Kennedy’s modern day low point came in 1991, a late night outing with his son and his nephew William Kennedy Smith. It resulted in disaster. Smith was cleared of raping a local woman after a spectacular and protracted court trial. Time Magazine published a story about the senator’s quote ‘grotesque image as a booser,’ and the event forced an eventual change in his life.
He reconnected with family friend Vicki Reggie, a divorced mother of two. The new marriage and a new mate settled the Senator. It reformed him in a way; he found it easier to talk about his own failings.
KENNEDY: I recognize my own shortcomings, the faults in the conduct of my private life.
WILLIAMS: The irrepressible Irishman could never be totally contained. He seemed to attack life. His image as the life of the party was richly deserved. And Ted Kennedy never met a song he didn’t at least try to conquer. Without much success.
KENNEDY: (Singing)
WILLIAMS: Sometimes even when children were present.
KENNEDY: The itsy bitsy spider climbs up the waterspout.
WILLIAMS: Late in life Ted Kennedy took on the role of family patriarch. When his niece got married, when his nephew’s plane was lost, Ted was team leader and crisis manager.
KENNEDY: Thank you, thank you.
WILLIAMS: He proved at the ’08 democratic convention he had one last hurrah left in him.
KENNEDY: This November, the torch will be passed again to a new generation of Americans. The work begins anew, the hope rises again, and the dream lives on.
WILLIAMS: He was happiest in the Senate and on the water. And when his giant heart stopped beating a giant life came to an end and an American era ended. He was the last of the Kennedy men, and the last prominent post FDR unreconstructed, oversize liberal in national politics. The Senate produces few lions, and the last of the modern era is now gone. Brian Williams, NBC News, New York.