

ESTHER ATKINS, 94

Esther Atkins | Judge's wife fought prejudice, raised kids

The widow of U.S. District Judge C. Clyde Atkins sought justice for immigrants while raising four grandchildren.



Esther Atkins. PROVIDED BY ATKINS FAMILY

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BY ELINOR J. BRECHER
EBRECHER@MIAMIHERALD.COM

While her husband, a Miami federal judge, was issuing landmark rulings protecting homeless people and immigrants -- and integrating Miami-Dade County's public schools -- Esther Castillo Atkins mounted her own social-justice crusades.

As chairwoman of the Miami Diocesan Council of Catholic Women's international relations committee, Esther Atkins considered it a sacred duty to aid the first-wave migration of anti-Castro Cubans to Miami in 1960.

She rallied support in a missive that began with a biblical quote and ended with her own, undeniable call to arms:

' `My only hands in this world are your hands,' " she wrote. "`This challenge is attributed to Christ,

who works only through us. Who are we not to honor the words of our Lord!"

It made perfect sense for his grandmother to end the question with an exclamation point instead of a question mark, said Carl Schulte, also of Coral Gables.

"She never asked questions," he said. "`She made statements."

Esther Atkins died Saturday at her Coral Gables condo, a month shy of her 95th birthday. She had outlived her husband, U.S. District Judge C. Clyde Atkins, by a decade, as well as two of three children and a grandchild.

Son C. Clyde Atkins Jr. died of asthma in 1996.

Daughter Carla Atkins Schulte died in 1977 of a heart attack, leaving four children, ages 2 through 10, among them Mary Margaret Schulte who drowned in 1998.

TRANSITION

"Nana," who lived just a mile away on Country Club Prado, made a seamless transition from grandmother to mother, said Carl.

"Other than her needing special eye drops because she was crying so much, you wouldn't know anything had happened," he said. "`There was work to be done and there were little babies.

Her "yoo hoo!" off the front porch was a well-known alert in the neighborhood that "any Atkins grandchildren better get home," said Carl. "`It was like an air raid signal."

She seldom lost her temper, he said, but went a little bit crazy watching the UF Gators and Miami Hurricanes on television.

Reluctant to utter a four-letter word, no matter how mild -- and horrified to hear the Lord's name taken in vain -- she'd say, "You're making me so d-dash mad!" and "`it's hot as Hades."

His mother-in-law "ruled the roost," said Tom Schulte, Carl's father.

On weekends, she turned her husband, the eminent jurist, into a taxi driver for herself and the grandchildren.

"I used to tell my kids they were the only kids I knew who had a federal judge for a chauffeur," Tom Schulte said.

Esther never had a license, but she must have known how to drive, Carl said, because "`she told everyone what they did wrong."

Esther Atkins belonged to the Shenandoah Garden Club, the Coral Gables Woman's Club, the Brickell Avenue Literary Society, the Coral Gables Country Club and the English Speaking Union.

While president of the Girl Scout Council of Tropical Florida from 1956-58, Atkins once resigned from the council's board after it refused to seat a Jewish member. She re-joined only after it relented, according to

Miami lawyer John Schulte, Carl's uncle.

``To her, all prejudice was simply un-American."

Esther Castillo was born April 30, 1914, in Key West. Her mother came from the Canary Islands, her father from Mexico. He helped build the overseas railroad bridges to the Keys, said Julie Atkins Landrigan, the Atkins's surviving child.

Esther was 6 when the family moved to Miami, said Landrigan. She lived downtown, attended Gesu High School and then business school. She worked as a secretary and briefly taught Spanish, accounting and bookkeeping at Gesu.

"The Depression was very hard for them," Landrigan said. "Their house burned and they lost everything. . . The St. Vincent de Paul Society helped them," which likely influenced Esther's lifelong charitableness.

She had known Clyde Atkins since the third grade and married him in 1937 after the future judge returned to Miami from the University of Florida law school. "She was very pleased" when President Lyndon Johnson appointed him to the federal bench in 1966, Landrigan said, though his work sometimes disrupted family life.

TUMULTUOUS TIMES

They needed FBI protection in 1969 and '70 after the judge ordered the Dade County School Board to stop blocking desegregation, then ruled that National Airlines could fire workers who walked off the job in a wildcat strike.

"At one point, federal marshals were watching the house," Landrigan remembered. ``They ended up having to have their phone number unlisted, but she was probably more concerned about the grandchildren than herself."

Landrigan called her mother "elegant in a lot of ways -- kind of formal," wearing heels, a hat and white gloves to take the bus downtown to the old Burdines department store.

Still, she went camping with the Girl Scouts, insisted on recycling before it was common, and hosted the family at a rural country home near Vero Beach despite its unreliable plumbing and lack of air conditioning.

His wig-wearing grandmother sat in the heat "insisting there was a breeze," Carl said. ``She never offered or accepted an excuse for anything."

Visitation will be 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at Van Orsdel Funeral Home, 4600 SW Eighth St., Coral Gables, followed by Mass at 9:30 a.m. Thursday at the Church of the Little Flower, 2711 Indian Mound Trail, Coral Gables.