

WARRIOR UNION WOMAN

The fire & sunshine of my friend Gwen

BY MARY MATTHEWS

TWU International Photographer,
Videographer and Media Producer

Gwen and I started working at TWU International around the same time, almost ten years ago. She in the COPE department, me in the Communications department. Both jobs required a great deal of travel and I often had the privilege of documenting Gwen's work through the years. From running COPE drives and State Conferences at TWU locals all over the country, to her lobbying work on Capitol Hill and mentoring of TWU female labor leaders on the Working Women's Committee.

Gwen's work, much like my own, allowed her the unique opportunity to connect to and engage with TWU members and leaders from all divisions, in all industries and in all regions of the country. Gwen knew TWU, inside and out.

It is her years of leadership and participation in the TWU Working Women's Committee that has most impressed me, inspired me and honestly, kept me going since her passing. In the years of covering these meetings, I have seen the direct effect Gwen has had on so many union women, who are sometimes just struggling to exist in a male dominated work place, craft or trade, even at their local union hall.

Gwen taught by example, calling her TWU sisters "warrior women", not ladies, not girls. Warrior Union Women; helping them navigate challenging environments and complicated issues, encouraging them always to step into their power, their fire and their sunshine.



The committee is now the largest it has ever been, with TWU warrior women in leadership roles of all kinds nation-wide. Some being the first top female leaders in the history of their locals EVER. At the most recent Working Women's Committee meeting, held in Washington, DC this past April, (the first since Gwen's passing,) woman after woman stood up, to share what they have learned from Gwen, heard from Gwen and will always take with them from Gwen:

"Be the person you are. Do everything that you can."

"Speak up for what you want. No matter what."

"If you have the right backing, you can make it through anything, together."

"Everyone here is a leader. Be the leader you are."

In too short a life, my friend Gwen moved women, TWU and the United States labor movement forward, by lifting others up over and over and over again. Arms stretched high and strong, with courage and caring and fire and sunshine. I miss you, Gwen and I take you with me, Gwen. Forward.

ALEX GARCIA

Gwen was a flight attendant with Southwest for more than 30 years. She was incredibly loyal to the TWU, the cause of labor and, mostly, women's issues across the board. Gwen was a relentless fighter for what she believed in. She was a loving, devoted and overall great mother to her only daughter, Alyson Reed.

Gwen's service to the TWU and the labor movement was vast. She served as the COPE Director and an International Rep. She helped start the State Conferences with Terry Daniels and myself.

Gwen was at her heart a pure political activist who wasn't afraid to roll up her sleeves and do the work that needed to be done to achieve positive outcomes to benefit working men and women. She was a good friend and loyal to all her friends and family and will be truly missed by all that were lucky enough to have known her.

SUSAN KERN:

Gwen had the ability to put aside her personal feelings and work with people she deeply disagreed with. Gwen did NOT have a poker face, and if you said or did something she didn't think much of, you could tell by the look on her face!

Gwen didn't consider her work a job, it was her calling. She was a tireless champion for labor.

Even in the face of defeat, Gwen always kept faith that with persistence she could make a difference and she did so with grace.

Gwen always stated proudly that she was a "Fourth generation Texas Democrat" and always spoke with intense love for her family. She brought that love to her work.

Once Gwen was your friend, there was no going back.

ANDREW RANGOLAN:

My friend Gwen...she and I were friends since 2009. She has always been there when I needed her and I will miss her dearly.

Gwen was hard working, intelligent, caring and a very thoughtful person. I learned a lot from her.

Gwen always called me when she was on any American Eagle flight (small scary aircraft) and we spoke just hours before her tragic accident.

I'm a better person today to have known her.

THOM MCDANIEL:

Gwen York was a fierce advocate for fairness and justice in the workplace and the world. While she was a strong believer in expanding her horizons through education and new experiences, she took everything she learned to mentor and encourage everyone in her orbit.

Most importantly, Gwen was the best daughter, mother, sister, aunt, and friend I've ever known. If Gwen was on your side, you were in very good company. We all miss her every day, but her spirit lives in every one of us who was lucky enough to know her.

HEATHER ROSE:

Gwen's impact on the TWU, and women especially, is immeasurable, and we have felt her loss so deeply. She took on so many tasks with a great curiosity and a love for this union, its people, and what we do. Her smile and laugh were infectious. She never had any judgement and was the first person I called to talk to. We built a trust and relationship that will never be forgotten and I truly miss her each and every day. She has left us much too soon.

MICHAEL MASSONI:

She was one of those people that was bigger than life itself. Causing one to actually believe she would live forever...or at least as long or longer than ones self. Gwen had a way of making anyone that she came in contact with feel as though they had just met their biggest advocate, fan and cheerleader all rolled in one.

Gwen once paid me a compliment by saying that I exhibited grace in how I handled myself in difficult situations. In her passing, I have come to the conclusion that she was the poster child for exhibiting grace in difficult situations. It may not have shown on the surface but it was definitely there...Be it single parenthood, going back to school in mid-life, deciding to be an industrial labor Unionist or standing up (with that big Texas voice) for all people's rights, that was my Gwenny's life's work summed up in two little words: Grace Personified.

TERRY DANIELS:

Gwen was a smart, loyal and hardworking labor activist. She worked hard for the causes she believed in and was relentless in her advocacy. I was fortunate to know her and call her a friend and I will miss her dearly.

In Memoriam: Melvin "Mel" Brackett

The former President of TWU Local 504, Melvin "Mel" Brackett, passed away on Sunday, April 22 at the age of 94. Mel was the President of Local 504's 14,000 members from 1979-1987.

Mel worked at Fairchild Republic before coming to Pan American World Airways. Once he became the President of Local 504, there were over 14,000 members. Mel led the Local in the 1985 strike against Pan Am. The strike, which lasted for one month, resulted in a 20% wage increase over three years, transfers or cash settlements for displaced commissary workers, a tow-tier wage structure, increased use of part-time workers and changes in job classification for the 5,700 Pan Am mechanics, baggage handlers and food service workers. Mel was a veteran of WWII, who saw active combat in the Pacific as a Naval Airman.

Mel was a strong Union leader and had very strong family morals. He will be missed.