

Dakota Images

Carole Hillard accomplished many “firsts” in her life, including becoming the first woman to serve as lieutenant governor of South Dakota. First and foremost, however, she considered herself an advocate for humanitarian causes.

Hillard, the oldest of three daughters, was born 14 August 1936 in Deadwood, South Dakota, to Eddie and Vernell Rypkema. She learned business and political skills from her father, who owned an automobile dealership and served as mayor of Deadwood. Upon earning a degree in education from the University of Arizona, she married John Hillard, a World War II veteran and teacher. The couple returned to the Black Hills, where they raised five children and operated a car dealership for over twenty years.

Carole Hillard went on to earn a master’s degree in education from South Dakota State University in 1982 and a master’s degree in political science from the University of South Dakota in 1984. She served on the boards of the Rapid City Chamber of Commerce and the Children’s Home Society and as the first woman president of the Rapid City Common Council. Following an appointment to the State Board of Charities and Corrections, she won election to the South Dakota House of Representatives in 1990. She served until 1994, when she was elected to the first of two terms as lieutenant governor in the administration of William J. Janklow.

Meanwhile, Hillard followed her passion for humanitarian causes. One of her first assignments was for the Peace Corps as an election monitor in Bosnia in 1997, shortly after the end of war there. She went on to work in more than sixty countries for the Peace Corps and other organizations such as Heifer International, the National Democratic Institute, and the International Republican Institute.

Hillard became known as “Carole the Intrepid” for her willingness to go to perilous or extremely poor areas, including Afghanistan. She bungee-jumped in Zimbabwe, went hang gliding in Brazil, and caught a piranha on the Amazon River. She died on 25 October 2007 in Lausanne, Switzerland, from complications following a fall from some steps on a boat in the Adriatic Sea. In her final e-mail to her children, she acknowledged the irony of the accident. “So the question is,” Hillard wrote, “are we not safer living the daring life?”

—Patricia A. Edman



Carole Hillard

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