



Gabrielle Giffords

The Honorable Gabrielle Giffords is a former Congresswoman from Arizona who is the founder of Giffords, Courage to Fight Gun Violence.

As told to her husband, astronaut Mark Kelly.

Gabby's ancestry, like many Americans, has European roots.

Both sides of her immediate family are the products of immigrants coming to the US in the nineteenth century. There are no documents or letters relating how or when they arrived.

Gabby's maternal great-great-grandfather was an immigrant from Scotland. He fought in the Civil War as a cannoneer and was mustered out because he was deafened by the noise. He settled in Kansas and received a pension from the government for his service. His wife was Irish, a Jenkins from the Emerald Isle. They had a son, Alexander Washington Fraser, Gabby's great-grandfather, who was a cattle buyer and lived in Nebraska.

The other side of the family from Gabby's mom, Gloria, were the Hesses and Ackards and hailed from Coalmont, Pennsylvania. They (Gabby's great-grandparents) were immigrants from Leipzig, Germany, and the patriarch of the family was a tailor. Family lore said that Grandmother Hess sat on the family money to deter her husband, Thomas Ackard (born in 1865), from gambling it away while making the journey to the United States aboard the westbound ship. One of their sons was named Thomas, and he was convinced by his brother John to come to Kansas and join him as a homesteader. Their mother, Mary Hess Ackard, took out a homestead, too. Thomas had married another Mary,

and they had fourteen children (Lula Catharine, b. 1889, d. 1897; Ethel Florence, b. 1891; Ada Olive, b. 1893; John Baldwin, b. 1895; May Ruth, b. 1896; Thomas Carlton, b. 1898; Jessie Mable, b. 1900; Mary Edna, b. 1903; Protus Mycleta, b. 1905; Gladys Susie, b. 1908; Thora Elnora, b. 1910; twins Elta and Alta, b. 1912; and Robert Leon, b. 1915.)

One of the last three was Thora Elnora, better known as DoDee. This was Gabby's grandmother. And she adored her. DoDee married Lloyd Lewis Fraser. Ethel Florence, one of the eldest of the fourteen children, never married. In 1945, DoDee, her marriage to Lloyd Fraser dissolving, moved from Arizona to Kansas and settled in the town of Colby. DoDee's family were homesteaders, and Gabby's mom, Gloria, grew up in this small town of Colby in the heart of America on a farm like so many of our ancestors.

Gabby's father's parents were European Jews who emigrated to the United States through Ellis Island in the nineteenth century. Her dad's dad was born Akiba Horenstein, and he was the first non-rabbi in a line of rabbis that dated back to the eighteenth century (thirteen of them, perhaps). Akiba's dad, who may or may not have been one of these rabbis, had plans to move the entire family to Egypt and open a grain mill along the Nile. But the plans fell through, and like so many Europeans of the time, they got on a ship and crossed the Atlantic. When Akiba entered public school in New York City at five or six years old, his teacher decided that "Akiba" was too difficult to remember, or too ethnic, or maybe she just didn't like it, so she declared that he would be called Gif. Akiba didn't have much say in the matter, so from that point forward he became Gif Horenstein. As an adult he formed a home heating-oil company with his brother in New York and called it Giffords Oil, because they felt it would be better for business, given the anti-Semitism at that time. Customers would often call and ask for Mr. Giffords. Tiring of responding that he was Gif Horenstein, he eventually legally changed his name to Gifford Giffords. All three brothers followed suit. These four brothers are perhaps the origin of the last name Giffords. (Gifford

is a common last name in the United States—Frank Gifford, the hall of fame NFL player, is probably the best-known Gifford. But anyone with the last name Giffords is probably related to Gabby’s grandfather or one of his three brothers.)

Gif Giffords was a salesman who peddled harmonicas, even though he couldn’t play a note. Later he sold hearing aids and real estate. And like so many on the East Coast, he was told to move west to deal with some health issues. He settled in Tucson, Arizona, in the 1930s and founded El Campo Tire and Automotive. Gif was a wonderful businessman and became a minor local celebrity through his television ads in which he would pitch tires, rotations, oil changes, and life advice to an expanding population in the desert. Gabby’s dad, Spencer, grew up in Tucson, but at the age of sixteen he stuck a gun in his belt, got on his motorcycle, and moved to Mexico City, where, lying about his high school graduation, he enrolled in Mexico City College. By the time the administration discovered his non-high-school-graduate status, he was a sophomore, and because his grades were good, was allowed to remain and eventually graduated.

He married, had a child (Gabby’s half brother, Alex), started a leather belt business, and embraced the Spanish language and Mexican culture, which he would later share with his second wife—Gabby’s mom, Gloria—and their two kids, Gabby and Melissa. After divorcing Alex’s mother, Spencer moved back to Tucson and later took over El Campo Tire from his dad. This is the same business that would lure Gabby back to Tucson after graduate school and help her settle back into the community where she was born. Like her grandfather, she pitched oil changes, new tires, and whatever your car might need—absent was the philosophy and life advice—Gabby just wanted to sell tires, and she became known throughout the area as the “tire girl.”

Gabby’s grandmother on her father’s side of the family was Ruth Paltrow (originally Paltrovitch). Ruth and the film director Bruce Paltrow were siblings, which is how Gabby and the actress Gwyneth Paltrow are

related. Ruth's father, Myer Paltrowitz (1877–1957), married a woman named Edith Ida Harriet Hyman.

In 2007, Gabby was elected to the United States Congress, where she represented Arizona's Eighth Congressional District. In January 2011, Gabby was the victim of an assassination attempt during a meeting with constituents near Tucson. She was seriously injured by a gunshot wound to the head. She resigned from Congress in January of 2012 in order to focus on her recovery.

Over the past six years, as Gabby has been continuing to recover, she and her husband, Mark Kelly, launched a nonprofit organization called Giffords, Courage to Fight Gun Violence, whose mission is to build a safer America by working with lawmakers and the constituents they represent to strengthen and improve gun laws. Gabby and Mark are some of the staunchest gun violence prevention advocates out there and have made a name for themselves nationally for their tireless work educating the public on the importance of enacting laws, policies, and programs proven to reduce gun violence and save lives.

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