

Rita R. Semel

Rita Semel, a native New Yorker, first came to San Francisco when her parents moved here in 1939. After graduating from Barnard College, she married and traveled with her soldier husband until he was shipped overseas. Returning to San Francisco, Rita worked first as a copy boy, then as a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle. When she went to work for the Chronicle, she had to sign a document, as did many women at that time, that she would give up her job when the men returned from the War. When her husband, Max, returned from Army service in Europe in 1945, they settled in San Francisco and Rita became the first Associate Editor of the newly formed Jewish Community Bulletin. She retired from the Bulletin in 1950 when her first daughter, Elisabeth, was born and began doing free lance public relations for the March of Dimes, the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, and the Israeli Consulate (then located in Los Angeles).

The 1950s and 1960s were a tumultuous time when San Francisco and the nation were struggling for integration, civil rights, and inter-ethnic and interfaith harmony. In 1964, Rita served on the committee that organized the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race, and she became its coordinator for the next 25 years.

It was during this period that she became a consultant to the Jewish Community Relations Council, and eventually joined the staff as Associate Director. Among the issues she worked on was overturning Proposition 14, a successful ballot initiative that had nullified the Rumford Fair Housing Law which prohibited racial and other discrimination in housing. Ultimately, Proposition 14 was declared unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court.

Rita served as Associate Director and then Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, where she built important coalitions and organized campaigns to advance a just society and a secure Jewish future. For more than five decades, Rita has mobilized broad coalitions to advance common causes of social concern, worked to advocate for those most in need, and built long lasting relationships among the Bay Area's many communities.

In addition to her important role as a founder of the San Francisco Interfaith Council and co-founder of the Interfaith Center at the Presidio, Rita served in a prominent leadership role as the first Chair of the Global Council for the United Religions Initiative. She served on the boards of Catholic Charities, Family Services America, San Francisco Resource and Leadership Council, Friends of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, Jewish Family & Children's Services, San Francisco Children's Rights Coalition, San Francisco Family Service Agency, Interfaith Center at the Presidio, San Francisco Homelessness Board, and Intergroup Clearinghouse. Rita served as Vice Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She was recognized for her distinguished service by many of these organizations, and was acknowledged by the Islamic Society of San Francisco, Bay Area Cultural Connections, and United Muslims of America for her work as a "longtime Jewish activist and interfaith pioneer." Rita was honored by the California State Assembly as the Woman of the Year from the 13th District, as well as with the United Way's *Mortimer Fleishhacker Jr. Volunteer Award* and the National Council of Jewish Women's *Hannah G. Solomon Award* for her leadership contributions. In 1990, Rita received the *Rosa Parks Award* from Women in Community Service. In 1995, she was a delegate to the fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in China. She also attended the 1985 conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

In 2008, Rita was honored by the Islamic Society of San Francisco for “outstanding service and achievement in interfaith dialogue among Abrahamic faiths.” In 2011 the San Francisco Interfaith Council created the Rita R. Semel Endowment Fund for Interfaith Work. She received the San Francisco Foundation’s Community Leadership Award in 2012 for her “life-long successes in creating healthy, just and inclusive communities in the Bay Area and worldwide, and for building bridges of understanding to help alleviate poverty and end discrimination.” In 2014 she was honored at the annual Catholic Charities CYO Loaves & Fishes Gala for her more than half a century of being a champion of San Francisco’s interfaith dialogue with their “Faith in Action” award.

Rita was the co-founder of the San Francisco Interfaith Council in 1990, and her tenure has been marked by orchestrating significant programs which have a direct impact on the lives of San Franciscans—from the emergency winter shelter program for the homeless, for which she has galvanized multi-faith and City cooperation, to the chaplaincy program at the Youth Guidance Center.

Rita served as the unofficial, trusted ambassador of the Jewish community to other religious communities for decades. Through the Jewish Community Relations Council, and later working on a national level through Project Interchange, Rita led dozens of clergy from other faiths to Israel, to learn about the Jewish community’s relationship to the land, people, and their history. She introduced religious leaders from throughout the Bay Area to Judaism, Jewish history, and the American and worldwide Jewish experience.

Rita served on the boards of Clinic by the Bay, Congregation Emanu-El, Grace Cathedral and In-Home Health Service Public Authority. She was appointed by Mayor Edwin Lee to the Human Services Agency Human Services Commission.

After 51 years of marriage, Max Semel died in 1994. He was preceded in death by their daughter, Jane, who died shortly before her 18th birthday. Their daughter, Elisabeth, married to attorney Jim Thomson, is a criminal defense attorney and is the Director of the Death Penalty Clinic at the University of California Berkeley School of Law.