

This Day in History... August 31, 1997

Princess Diana's Sudden Death



Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund mint sheet

On August 31, 1997, the world was shocked when Princess Diana was involved in a car crash that took her life.

Born on July 1, 1961, Diana had a privileged childhood, growing up at the Park House, owned by the Royal Family. Diana began her school days at the Silfield Nursery School in Norfolk, and remained there until age nine when she was sent to Riddlesworth Hall. She later attended West Heath boarding school near Sevenoaks, Kent.

At West Heath, Diana received the school's award for the girl who gave the maximum help to classmates. The headmistress later remembered her as a "lovely, loving girl who excelled at field sports and dancing." Diana completed her schooling in Switzerland at the Institut Alpin Videmanette finishing school, spending as much time as she could skiing.

Diana met Prince Charles at a party in 1977 and the two began to date. Diana quickly went from living a private life to being a public figure. She was photographed almost everywhere she went and became a fashion icon.

Prince Charles proposed in February 1981, and the pair was married that July. It was one of the most anticipated weddings of the century, watched by 700 million people worldwide. Less than a year later, Diana gave birth to her first son, William. And Harry was born in 1984. Despite their royal heritage, Diana insisted her boys have as normal a childhood as possible.

As a princess, and more importantly, a member of the royal family, it was expected that Diana show an interest in charity and give back to those less fortunate. Diana did so much more. She had a genuine concern for the well being of others and did all she could to help them and make their situations known throughout the world, encouraging others to help too.

Diana spent a great deal of time working with people with HIV and AIDS. In fact, she was the first celebrity to be photographed touching an HIV-positive person. Many people still believed that this disease could be transmitted through casual contact. Diana showed the world that these people shouldn't be feared, but treated with kindness and warmth.

One of the more publicized causes Diana dedicated herself to was the abolishment of land mines. She was very vocal about ridding the world of land mines – which led some to label her a "loose canon." Her concern was for the number of injuries created by land mines. Her main focus was the injuries to children, and the long-term problems following these incidents. Diana's voice didn't go unheard. Many believe that her campaign was influential in the Ottawa Treaty, which banned the use of anti-personnel land mines. Unfortunately, this legislation didn't go into effect until after her death.

During her lifetime, Diana was also a member of a number of other charitable organizations. These included the Royal Marsden NHS Trust (a cancer fund), The Leprosy Mission, and Centerpoint Soho (assisting homeless youths). She was also an active supporter of the Greater Ormond Street Children's Hospital and the English National Ballet.

By the early 1990s, Diana and Charles had begun growing apart. They separated in 1992 and divorced four years later. Though no longer a royal, Diana was still the Princess of Wales, and popularly known as the "People's Princess."

Despite being divorced from the future king of England and having her name constantly in the press, Diana felt like her life was just beginning. In 1997, she began dating her long-time friend Dodi Fayed, the 41-year-old son of an Egyptian billionaire.

That August, the happy couple vacationed in Monaco, Italy, and Sardinia before stopping for a night in Paris. Hounded by paparazzi everywhere they went, they used a decoy car so they wouldn't be followed, but photographers on motorcycles still noticed them. To make matters worse, the car's driver was intoxicated and driving too fast, and none of the vehicle's occupants were wearing seat belts. While entering the Pont de l'Alma underpass, the car struck another vehicle before swerving into a support-column and spinning out of control. The driver and Fayed were pronounced dead at the scene. Attempts were made to save Diana, but her injuries were too severe and she died at 4:00 that morning.

The world was shocked at the announcement of her passing and millions traveled to London for her funeral on September 6. Despite her tragic death, Diana's sons have carried on her charitable legacy, informing a new generation of their mother's good works.

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