



**American  
Red Cross**

## **GAIL** McGovern

I'm often asked to talk about my background and how I came to have the wonderful privilege of leading the American Red Cross. The truth is that my family has played a very significant role throughout my life, and I've had the opportunity to learn a great deal from many incredible professional and personal experiences I've had along the way. Here is my story, and the journey that led me to the American Red Cross.



## In Her Own Words

### **Family History**

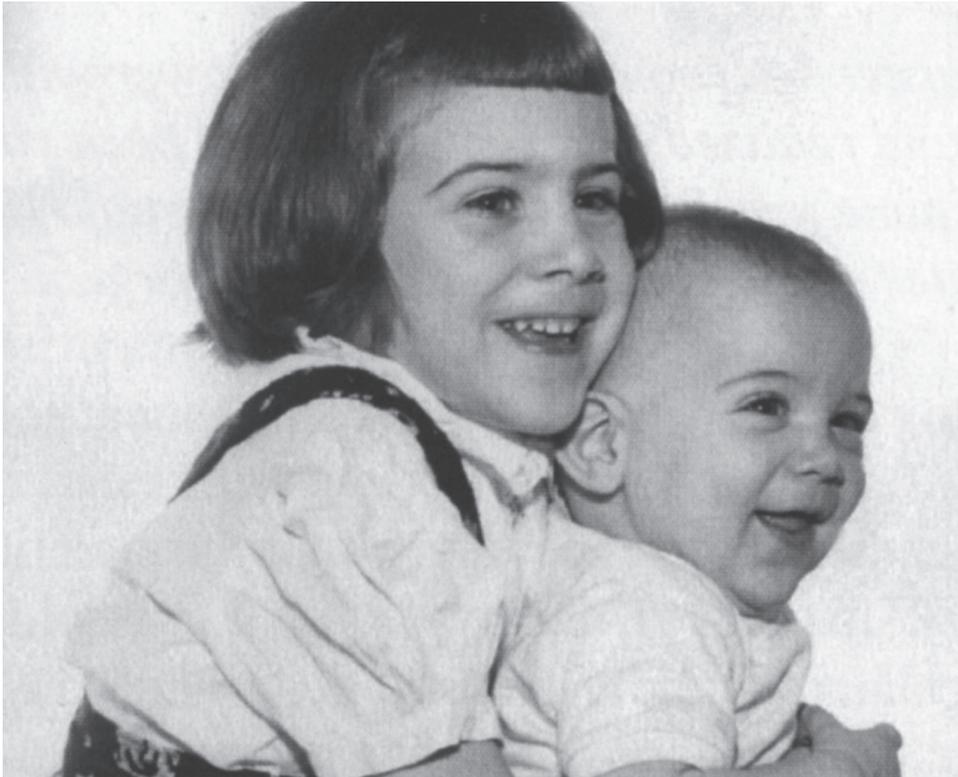
I was born on January 12, 1952, in Brooklyn, New York, to Richard and Florence (Richie and Florie) Rosenberg. Both my parents were also born and raised in Brooklyn. My first memories are of visiting Prospect Park with my mother and younger brother, and clinging to mom's skirt while dragging my brother in his stroller up four flights of stairs to our fourth floor apartment. I also vividly remember my dad having me wear a Yankees cap as a little girl, even though we lived in Dodgers' territory. I've been a lifelong Yankees fan ever since.

There is no doubt in my mind that I gained my love of learning, work ethic, and determined spirit from my family and their own experiences emigrating from Russia and building new lives in the United States. Each of my four grandparents left Russia in the early

1900's to escape Jewish persecution. My paternal grandfather came to the U.S. at the age of 18 by traveling in steerage. He worked as a tailor's assistant and saved enough money to bring his four brothers and sisters to the U.S. My maternal grandfather started working in the garment district in New York, where he and his brother became successful dress designers. He lost everything in the Great Depression, but was able to build it back in the years after to a large success.



**Florie and Richie Rosenberg, Gail McGovern's parents.**



**Gail Rosenberg and her brother, Stevie.**

My dad, Richie, graduated high school at the age of 14 and went to City College in New York. When he turned 18, he was drafted and fought in Europe during WWII—landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day. Dad was the only person of Jewish descent in his entire battalion. He was there when the Allied forces liberated the Dachau prison camp. After the War was over, he became an optometrist— eventually opening a practice in Newark, New Jersey.

My mom, Florie, graduated high school at 16 and went to New York University—where she majored in science and minored in math. She was later accepted into medical school, but didn't attend because she got married and stayed home to raise

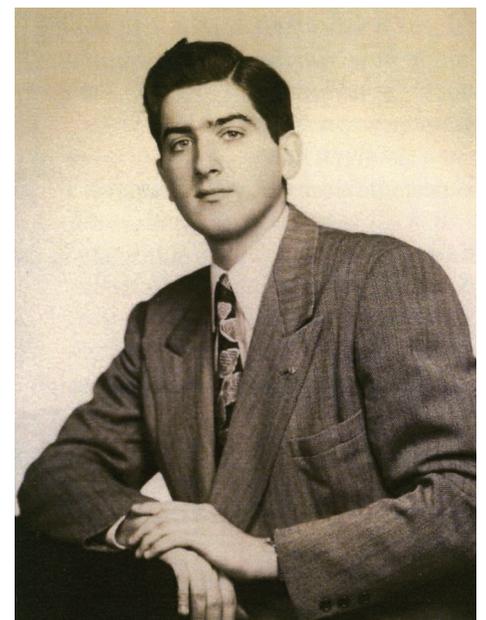
our family. Not only did mom manage the household, but she also served as a bookkeeper and office manager for my dad's practice.

### **Childhood and Education**

When I was six, my family moved to a house in Springfield, New Jersey, which at the time had a population of 15,000 people. Dad was one of the many GIs who received housing assistance, and our neighborhood was mostly composed of fellow war veterans and their families. Our house was a modest split level on a quarter acre plot—and it remained the home my parents lived in until they moved into a retirement community in their later years.

I had what I believe to be a simple upbringing in Springfield. My brother and I attended public schools, and we learned from mom how to be frugal and to stretch a dollar. My parents gave me lunch money and paid for my clothes, but I worked to earn money for anything extra. I got my first job at the age of 14 and worked as a cashier making \$1.43 an hour. From that time forward, I always had a job, including as a factory worker stuffing envelopes for a brief period.

Starting with my very first job, I loved working and feeling self-sufficient. My parents always stressed the importance of giving back to the community, and having some income from work allowed me to start giving to charity at a young age. I also was a very active volunteer in my childhood and early adult years – working at various times as a volunteer candy striper, Girl Scout leader for seven



**Richie Rosenberg, Gail McGovern's father.**



Don and Gail on their wedding day.

years, and a tutor for underprivileged students. At school, I was a social butterfly, but after being bullied by another classmate in the 6th grade, I made up my mind then and there that I would never be mean to anyone again (and I've tried my best to remain true to that promise ever since).

After graduating high school, I started college at Boston University, because that was where all my friends went to school. I transferred in 1971 to Johns



Gail McGovern and her daughter, Annie

Hopkins University, which was the first year that JHU began accepting women.

## Professional Life

When I started at Hopkins, I was one of 50 women enrolled at the school, versus 1,900 men. I majored in Quantitative Sciences, and after graduation I got my first professional job as a programmer at Bell Telephone of Pennsylvania, part of AT&T. At that time, I was among the first women cohort in AT&T to be writing code. Because of some generous mentors and colleagues, I was able to move up the technical ranks—eventually becoming a lead programmer and then a district manager, supervising programmers.

While at AT&T, I met the love of my life, Don McGovern, and we've been married for 33 years. In our early years together, Don and I were both middle managers, and although we tried just about everything, we were unable to have children, so we worked long hours and focused on advancing our careers. During this time, with tremendous support from my husband, I also went back to school to get my MBA from Columbia University—working full time and taking classes all day on Fridays.

In 1992 I was promoted to an officer position at AT&T. By that time, Don and I had adopted our daughter,

Annie, in 1990. But not long after my promotion, Don was diagnosed with lymphoma. Having a two-year old child at home and a husband going through chemotherapy and radiation treatments was extremely tough, and it put some very difficult demands on my time and was very draining emotionally. But my coworkers at AT&T were very supportive, and, thankfully, Don achieved a full recovery.

I served in a variety of roles at AT&T in sales, operations, IT, and marketing. I then went on to run the company's Business Markets division, and later the Consumer Markets division. In 1998, after 24 years with AT&T, I joined Fidelity Investments where I oversaw their distribution channels, branch centers and phone centers. Eventually I was promoted to the President of Personal Investments.

In 2002, I joined the faculty at the Harvard Business School, where I taught Marketing for six years—earning the title of Professor of Management Practice. My marketing philosophy was that you must always listen to your customers and experience what they are experiencing—and that if you show respect for your customers and understand their needs, they will show respect for you. I try my best to stay true to this philosophy today, which is why I always keep two sets of people in mind whenever I make a decision at the Red Cross: the clients



Gail McGovern talks to volunteers and employees at the Disaster Headquarters during her visit to the tornado-hit areas in Joplin, Missouri.

we serve and the donors who make our work possible.

I loved both my job at Harvard and living in the Boston area—where my brother and mom were both located. But in 2008, I was approached about the opportunity to lead the American Red Cross. This venerable institution was facing a series of challenges, but I believed that my business experience, coupled with my commitment to giving back, made this an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

For the past seven and a half years, we've built what I believe to be an exceptional team at the Red Cross.

Together, we've put new systems and reforms in place that have helped to ensure we best serve those in need every single day—while also being the best stewards of our donor dollars. It is my honor to serve with the Red Cross, and I never forget why I joined this wonderful institution.

I am also incredibly blessed to be a two-time breast cancer survivor, having first been diagnosed in January 2006, and then receiving the news about my second occurrence on January 13, 2010, the day after both my birthday and the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti. This

challenge has certainly been a personal one—but one that is put in perspective almost daily with the challenges I see in the faces of those we serve.

One of the more profound lessons I've learned on my journey is that our life experiences are all connected in some way. For me, I think often of my childhood in Brooklyn all those years ago to my job now as President and CEO of the American Red Cross today. I'm thankful that the lessons I learned as a young girl from two hard-working and proud parents have served me so well.