

Abby endings

Pauline Friedman Phillips, better known as legendary advice columnist 'Dear Abby', passed away aged 94 last month. **Alexandra Roach** takes a look at her life and legacy.

THE American Dream. The idea that in America, through sheer hard work, anyone can make their fortune. It has inspired immigration to the USA from far and wide since the 17th century as people sought a better life.

The child of Ukrainian-Jewish immigrants, Pauline Friedman Phillips was born Pauline Esther Friedman in Iowa on July 4, 1918. America's Independence Day certainly seems a fitting birthdate for the creator of an American institution: the "Dear Abby" newspaper advice column which, for more than 50 years, dispensed witty and compassionate advice on life's troubles, often delivered in snappy one-liners.

Phillips's parents Rebecca and Abraham arrived penniless in New York City in 1905, just two of hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing religious persecution and, in Abraham's case, the draft. But their pursuit of the American Dream yielded swift success: within a decade, they went from having nothing to owning a chain of movie theatres.

The four Friedman daughters were well-educated; Phillips studied journalism before marrying businessman Morton Phillips in 1939, with whom she had son Edward and daughter Jeanne. A housewife, Phillips volunteered with the Red Cross and the United Jewish Appeal and played mahjong with her girlfriends.

"It never occurred to me that I'd have any kind of career," Phillips told *The Los Angeles Times* in 1986. "But after I was married, I thought, 'there has to be something more to life than mahjong.'"

Phillips told Larry King in an interview in 1990, "There is always an answer. You can't change anyone but yourself. You've got to play the cards that are dealt you and you have to live with this, do the best you can."

Thirty-four years earlier, Phillips had taken her own advice: unimpressed with *The San Francisco Chronicle's* advice column and sure she could do better, Phillips marched into the offices of the paper's editor and told him so.

Unmoved, the editor – the legendary Stanleigh Arnold, who also discovered *The Far Side* cartoonist Gary Larson – gave Phillips several weeks of letters to look over. He asked her to bring the finished columns back the following week.

Within a few hours, Phillips was handing her completed work to a surprised Arnold. Telling her he'd look over her writing and call her, Phillips returned home to find the phone ringing. Impressed with her writing, Arnold hired her on the spot.

Despite attending university, at 37 Phillips had no real work experience; she didn't even have a social security number. But what she did have was a natural flair for writing and a talent for delivering witty one-liners full of sound, common-sense advice.

Instead of taking on the identity of the previous advice columnist – a syndicated column written by Denver-based journalist Frances Foster under the pseudonym of "Molly Mayfield" – Phillips created her own column from scratch. But first, she needed a name.

**"You can't change anyone but yourself.
You've got to play the cards that are dealt you."**

Pauline Friedman Phillips
"Dear Abby" columnist

IN the first book of Samuel, a foolish man named Nabal is spared the wrath of King David due to the quick thinking of his wife, Abigail, who advises David against killing Nabal, lest he be burdened by a heavy conscience when he became Israel's king.

Realising his error, David told Abigail, "Blessed is your advice and blessed are you."

Thus 'Abigail' seemed a perfect choice for the budding advice columnist. Phillips chose 'Van Buren', after the eighth president of the USA; reportedly she thought it sounded "aristocratic".

Within a few months of the column, titled "Dear Abby", launching, the newly-named Abigail Van Buren had signed a syndication deal. By 1961, the column was in 500 papers worldwide and Phillips was receiving thousands of letters every week from people seeking Abby's guidance.

While Phillips was famed for those amusing one-liners – when one woman asked Abby what her husband was thinking of when he traded their sensible sedan for a two-seater sports car, Phillips replied, "himself" – she was serious about her work. She had an army of experts in areas as diverse as law and psychology to politics and medicine on hand.

In her column and CBS Radio



The late Pauline Friedman Phillips aka advice columnist Abigail Van Buren.

show – which aired from 1963 to 1975 – Phillips tackled controversial topics like abortion, AIDS and mental illness, and was an advocate for the rights of women, the gay community and people with disabilities.

"Whenever I say a kind word about gays, I hear from people," Phillips said in 1998. "People throw ... parts of the Bible at me. It doesn't bother me. I've always been compassionate towards gay people."

If a letter sounded particularly

her sister's failure to mention she was starting her own advice column, especially one which became such direct and fierce competition for "Ask Ann Landers".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the animosity became public, readers couldn't get enough: readership and syndication numbers rose dramatically for both columns. So intrigued was the public by the sisters' estrangement, famed American magazine *Life* ran a feature about the feud in 1958.

The estrangement reportedly came to an end in 1964 and Lederer later told the press "the feud was vastly exaggerated". Despite this, rumours continued the reunion was all for show, which both sisters and their spokespeople vehemently denied.

BY the 1990s, "Dear Abby" was syndicated in more than 1000 newspapers worldwide, reaching approximately 100 million readers every week. But by the mid-1990s, Phillips had begun to show signs of Alzheimer's disease.

In 2000, Phillips began sharing her "Dear Abby" byline with her daughter, Jeanne, who had been her mother's apprentice from the age of 14 when the column began. When Phillips retired in 2002, the year Lederer died, Jeanne took over the authoring of the column, a role she retains to this day.

Today, the column's press syndicate, Universal Uclick, claims the column is syndicated to 1400 newspapers worldwide and enjoys a daily readership of 110 million.

When Phillips, a giant of the print era of media, passed away aged 94 on January 13, 2013, the news broke on popular American entertainment website TMZ.com.

"I have lost my mother, my mentor and my best friend," Jeanne Phillips told TMZ.com. "My mother leaves a legacy of compassion, commitment and positive social change. I will honour her memory every day by continuing this legacy."

That legacy, the column that

Phillips built, was and remains a popular culture phenomenon which has been referenced in everything from movies to political cartoons.

In 1964, "Dear Abby" wrote, "The purpose of life is to amount to something and have it make some difference that you lived at all."

If ever there was someone who took their own advice, it was Phillips, a woman who gave others sound advice for a living.

Abby's wit and wisdom

Dear Abby: About four months ago, the house across the street was sold to a "father and son" – or so we thought. We later learned it was an older man about 50 and a young fellow about 24. This was a respectable neighbourhood before this "odd couple" moved in. They have all sorts of strange-looking company. Men who look like women, women who look like men, blacks, whites, Indians. Yesterday I even saw two nuns go in there!... Abby, these weirdos are wrecking our property values! How can we improve the quality of this once-respectable neighbourhood? – Up In Arms

Dear Up: You could move.

Dear Abby: What is the cure for a man that has been married for 33 years and still can't stay away from other women? – His Wife

Dear Wife: Rigour mortis.

Dear Abby: I don't want to appear conceited but I'm forced to admit that I am one guy who has everything. Women are always flocking around me and telling me how good-looking I am and what a marvelous personality I have. I'm beginning to find this pretty annoying and extremely tiring. I just want to live a normal quiet life. How can I dissuade these hopeful females? – C.W.

Dear C.W.: Keep talking.

Dear Abby: I am 44 years old and would like to meet a man my age with no bad habits. – Rose

Dear Rose: So would I.