

Florida Trend

FLORIDA'S BUSINESS AUTHORITY

NOVEMBER 2024

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Triumph *and* Tragedy

Outgoing Senate President Kathleen Passidomo discusses her forward-looking legislative accomplishments and her husband's tragic death.

PLUS...

- ▶ Second Chance Hiring
- ▶ Marina Consolidators Hit the Pause Button

\$4.95

Custom Content ...

- ▶ Greater Daytona Area / Volusia County Economic Profile
- ▶ Florida's Philanthropic Community



TRIUMPH *and* Tragedy

Senate President Kathleen Passidomo has bridged divides, tackled big policy issues and, as she wraps up her leadership tenure, is navigating the shattering loss of her husband.

By Michael Fechter

Kathleen Passidomo was the third woman lawyer in Naples and the third woman to serve as president of the Florida Senate.

Late last March, Kathleen Passidomo stood before television cameras, before the governor, her peers in the Florida Legislature and numerous medical leaders proclaiming that “today is the culmination of, I think, my career in the Legislature.”

Gov. Ron DeSantis was in Bonita Springs to sign a series of bills into law that make up the “Live Healthy” package, a priority of Passidomo’s as she ended a two-year tenure as Senate president, just the third woman to hold the job. The initiative seeks to improve access to health care for rural and poor Floridians, enhance behavioral health services and research, and take steps to ensure the state has enough doctors, nurses, dentists and other medical professionals to care for an ever-growing population.

Passidomo’s tenure has been marked by a series of bills that aim to preserve and enhance the state’s quality of life far into the future. That includes attempts to increase affordable housing and preserve vast sections of state land. Live Healthy, however, tops her list.

“Suffice it to say that this is a game changer,” the Naples Republican said at the signing. “Our state will forever be changed in a really good way.”

The plan was for her life to change in a really good way, too. Passidomo, 71, has two more years left in the Legislature before she’s term-limited out. But with her tenure as Senate president over, the pressure and demands for her time would be much lower. She and John, her husband of nearly 45 years, planned to travel. He wanted to see all the National Parks. She wanted to visit all the presidential libraries.

John, 72, mapped out the first trip while Kathleen was working in Tallahassee. She’d come home on weekends to find the kitchen counter filled with books, charts and notes about where they’d go, where they’d stay and what they would do.

“You know how you go on vacation with your spouse you start nitpicking on things? ‘I don’t want to do this. I don’t want

to do that.' From the moment we left Naples, we agreed on everything," she says. "It was just natural. Everything was perfect."

She never saw him fall — but she heard it. John was walking behind her as they made their way back up toward the top of a trail in Utah's Bryce Canyon National Park on April 3, just 12 days after the Live Healthy signing marked the pinnacle of her 14-year legislative career. "I turned around and I saw him lying face down in the path. I started to go down to him, and then I started to slip because it was icy," she says. "A guy who was coming down as we were going up grabbed me and said, 'No, you stay right here. You're going to fall.'"

She didn't know it, but John broke his neck. It was clear he wasn't breathing, and other hikers, including a doctor, started doing chest compressions. "Meanwhile, I'm shaking," she says. The lack of oxygen left him brain dead. Doctors kept him alive with a ventilator long enough to give the Passidomos' three grown daughters time to fly to Utah to say goodbye.

She wonders if John had become dehydrated. It was cold, and she didn't think he was drinking enough water. Maybe that's what led to the fall, she says back in her Naples home, trying to come to terms with her loss and figure out what comes next.

"The first month, I didn't talk to anybody. I just hibernated," Passidomo says. "I just stayed home. I couldn't do anything. It's still hard. Every day is different. I live hour by hour."

For weeks, she harbored the routine expectation that John was about to come through the front door. Tucker, their 9-year-old yellow lab, "looks for him all the time. If the door is closed to the bedroom, he goes and stands in front of it thinking that he's in there. He's still

KATHLEEN PASSIDOMO, 71

BORN: Jersey City, N.J.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in art history from Trinity College in Washington, D.C. (1975); law degree from Stetson Law School (1978).

CAREER: Founding partner, Kelly, Passidomo & Alba, Naples; Served in the Florida House of Representatives (2010-2016); Currently serving in the Florida Senate (2017-2026).

FAMILY: She has three daughters, Catarina Passidomo Townes, Francesca Passidomo and Gabriella Passidomo, and two grandsons, William and Emilio.

STAYING GROUNDED: "In Tallahassee, a lot of people drink the Kool-Aid," she says. "You walk down the street and people tell you you're the tallest, smartest, funniest, nicest person in the world and there's nobody like you. And many people start to believe that. I never really believed it — I'm a little bit older than a lot of them. [John] kept me grounded. But he was so supportive. And that's rare in this generation."



Kathleen Passidomo was joined by daughters Catarina, left, Francesca, and Gabriella, and husband John, at her 2021 election as president-designate of the Florida Senate.



Incoming Senate President Ben Albritton, left, says Passidomo takes the long view with policy. “I’ve got a sticker on my laptop that says, ‘wise people are the ones that plant trees that they know they’ll never sit in the shade of.’ ... That’s her. No kidding. That’s her.”

looking for him. He’s suffering.”

As is she. She keeps his key fob to his gym in her car and treats it like a worry bead. “I just keep feeling it because that was his everyday life. And it keeps him close.”

It was the second major loss to upend her life in a matter of months. Passidomo’s father, Alfonse Cinotti, died a year ago in Naples at age 100. When Passidomo came home from Tallahassee on weekends, she’d devote a day to John and a day to her dad.

She has been boosted by an outpouring of support and love from her family, friends and community, and has learned about everyday acts of kindness John did that touched lives. It seems to give her strength.

“She is really strong,” says eldest daughter Catarina Passidomo Townes. “(Townes’ sister) Francesca has said she’s the strongest person she knows. And she’s very independent. But they were just an incredible team ... she is coping as best she can.”

As parents, the Passidomos taught as much by deed as by word, says Francesca Passidomo, a Naples attorney.

“She and my dad both had this absolutely inherent ability to treat people with respect and nothing else ... and it doesn’t matter what level the person is at. It’s complete respect for their humanity. And that’s something she brings into politics, but that’s something that she brought into our childhood.”

Policy over politics

She brought it to Tallahassee, too, says State Sen. Darryl Rouson, (D-St. Petersburg). He became friends with Passidomo after she joined him in the Florida House in 2010. They each were elected to the state Senate in 2016.

“She truly believes that the Senate’s role and the legislator’s job is to pass good policy,” Rouson says. “Debate it fairly, but not with vitriol. Discuss it fully, but not with disrespect. And she tried to live by that.”

He points to a Community Affairs Committee hearing last February in which senators debated SB 1122, the “Protection of Historical Monuments and Memorial Act.” The proposed legislation opened the door to fining or removing from office local officials responsible for removing historical monuments and memorials.

During public comments, a Live Oak attorney called the removal of Confederate statues “part of the cultural war being waged against white society.” Sen. Alexis Calatayud (R-Miami) asked if “white society” was a reference to white supremacy. “Yes,” the attorney said, “it was.” Senators on both sides of the aisle appeared stunned. Democrats walked out.

When she was alerted to the increasingly tense hearing, Passidomo dispatched Senate Majority Leader Ben Albritton (R-Wauchula) to lower the temperature, fearing that any building acrimony could threaten the Senate’s work.

Albritton says he didn’t know what to expect or what he would do. Walking to the committee



room he thought, “If Kathleen was in my shoes, how would she handle this?” He spoke individually with each senator, “to really understand where they were coming from, what their concerns were, gauged their response to some of the things that were being said at the dais. ... It really wasn’t partisan.”

Passidomo declared the bill dead a short time later. “There are problems with the bill,” she told reporters. “I’m not going to bring a bill to the floor that is so abhorrent to everybody.”

“I thought that was testament to her wanting to be a unifier as opposed to someone who fed separation and division,” Rouson says.

Five days later, Passidomo made it clear that a list of priorities issued by the Florida Republican Party also was going nowhere. It included the monuments bill along with “ending forced pc pronouns” and “ending rainbow flags on government buildings.”

“Our bill process is not the Republican Party of Florida,” Passidomo told reporters. “We are the Legislature. We make the laws.”

The move drew censure from the Lake County Republican Party for “actions unbecoming of a Republican official.” Lake County Republican chairman and former state Sen. Anthony Sabatini called her “a disgrace to the GOP (who) has stabbed Sunshine State conservatives in the back.”

Passidomo shrugs off the criticism. “My philosophy has always been, what are the problems out

there and how do you fix them? I’m not into the politics and the hot-button issues that don’t affect the day-to-day lives of everybody. That’s for others.”

The drama of politics was never something Passidomo found persuasive, says her daughter Francesca. “She never lost who she was, she never gave into the drama that maybe would have pulled other people because they felt like that’s the only way to gain power. She is remarkable in that sense, to stay true to who she is and still have climbed to where she is without ever negotiating on those principles.”

Passidomo broke with tradition by naming Rouson vice chair of the powerful Appropriations Committee, a position no Democrat had held in years. With a super-majority of 28 out of the Senate’s 40 members, “We could have stomped on them,” she says. “Why would we do that?”

The Senate president’s duties extend beyond what bills get heard. They include assigning parking spaces at the Capitol or where a senator sits on the floor, Albritton notes. In the Florida House, and traditionally in the Senate, the super-majority Republicans sit up front while Democrats fill the back rows.

Passidomo arranged seats by district number. Party affiliation and seniority were not factors.

“We have 40 senators,” she notes. “We each represent 600 and some odd thousand people and they’re not all alike. The people in my district are very different than the people in Miami-Dade. Different personalities, different philosophies, different viewpoints on life. ... But I always took the philosophy of I’m not going to step all over people to get done the agenda. I’m going to try to work with people.”

Through the Years:

- ▶ Kathleen and John Passidomo, far left, in 1980, the year after they married.
- ▶ By 1983, they were a family of three, with firstborn Catarina.
- ▶ Family dinners became a must for the Passidomos, seen here in 1995, after Catarina at age 10 informed her parents they were working too much.



‘Live Healthy’

Rouson has been sober for more than 26 years and wants to champion people in recovery and mental health challenges. “She committed to being a positive force with me on those issues. She kept her word.”

In 2022, she helped shepherd Rouson’s bill allowing people in recovery programs to become “peer specialists” — a step short of being a counselor — to other addicts. The bill includes a training program. “In the program of recovery,” he says, “the therapeutic value of one addict helping another is without parallel. She understood that.”

She also solicited his input for Live Healthy’s behavioral health components and for ideas on how the state should use more than \$3 billion from lawsuits settled with opioid companies.

The Live Healthy bills passed the Senate unanimously and drew a lone dissenting vote in the State House. Despite their support, some Democrats criticized the package for maintaining Florida’s status as one of only 10 states not to expand Medicaid for low-income adults.

To Passidomo, “it doesn’t matter.” The state also is projected to need nearly 18,000 more doctors in the next decade to keep pace with growth. “You can have the best insurance in the world or no insurance, but if you show up at the hospital and there’s nobody there to treat you, what good is it? So how do we solve that problem and the controversial issues we can face later on? So the workforce (component) became the No. 1 priority along with treatment innovation and technology.”

The daughter of an ophthalmologist who grew up in

Central Park South

Having witnessed and even contributed to Southwest Florida’s rapid growth in her law practice, Passidomo eagerly jumped onto the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Legislation passed in 2021, before she was Senate President, aims to preserve nearly 18 million acres of land running from the Panhandle to Southwest Florida. To make that happen, the state is buying development rights from farmers and ranchers. They still own the land and can use it as they wish. They just can’t develop it or sell it to people who will.

Because the public is paying for the development rights, Passidomo wanted to add something that let people enjoy the conservation areas without threatening the plants and wildlife. Last year, she pushed for a bill by state Sen. Jason Brodeur (R-Sanford) to link the Corridor to Florida’s Greenways and Trails System and the SUN Trail Network. The Florida Department of Transportation is working on adding bicycle paths with the work funded by money the state brings in from its gambling compact with the Seminole Tribe. “I believe this will be Florida’s Central Park,” she has said, “a legacy we can be proud to leave for future generations of Floridians and visitors to enjoy.”

“She is really strong,” says eldest daughter Catarina Passidomo Townes. “(Townes’ sister) Francesca has said she’s the strongest person she knows. And she’s very independent.”



The daughter of a New Jersey ophthalmologist, Passidomo had been thinking about Florida's health care future for years when she started work on the Live Healthy package, which aims to grow Florida's health care workforce and improve access to care.

Glen Ridge, N.J., she had been thinking about Florida's health care future for years. "It was the little things. We graduate all these people from medical school and they have nowhere to go, so they leave the state for their residency and they get married, have kids, build relationships in some other state and there's no reason for them to come back to Florida. So we just wasted all that" education and training.

The state needed a framework to build its medical workforce, from the dental hygienist to the specialist. Live Healthy expands medical residencies and offers loan forgiveness to doctors who work in poor and underserved communities. It designates hospitals tied to medical schools at the University of Miami, University of South Florida and University of Florida as behavioral health teaching hospitals, and it creates a Health Care Innovation Council.

Passidomo spoke with health care officials throughout the state to solicit ideas for Live Healthy's components. Tampa General Hospital (TGH) CEO John Couris brought a Florida Blue executive to his June 2023 meeting with her and

her staff to provide perspective from a health care provider and an insurer. They connected on innovation — finding ways technology and new treatment approaches can improve care and increase efficiency. For example, TGH has a "hospital at home" program that revives old-fashioned house calls, allowing some patients to heal from the comfort of home. It costs less and reduces re-admission rates, Couris says.

He was struck by Passidomo's interest in behavioral health, going so far as to seek input from one of the country's top psychiatric hospitals — McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., which is part of Mass General Brigham in Boston and is staffed by Harvard Medical faculty.

"That's digging deep on an issue and that's looking for other people's thoughts and opinions and ideas to try to incorporate what makes sense for us into our bill," Couris says. "That's methodical work, and that's being curious and open to learning."

'Live Local'

Collier County lacked affordable housing when she and John moved there as newlyweds in 1979, Passidomo says. "They've really not done much about it," she says. "A lot of lip service. Because the reality is there's a misperception of what workforce housing is. There are many people who have retired here from other places that don't want the great unwashed living near them. And they don't understand that that's not what we're talking about."

Live Local, a package that Passidomo shepherded through the Legislature in 2023, tried to attack the affordable housing problem from three sides. Working people “need places to live,” she says.

When people express that concern, she tells them that a young assistant state attorney is likely to qualify for workforce housing. “And they’re like, ‘really? I would like to have a lawyer live next door to me so he can give me free legal advice.’ Those are the kind of conversations that you try to have with people.”

The schoolteacher, nurse or bank teller working in Collier County also is likely to be unable to afford a home there. “They are the people who work with us every day. They need places to live. They need to be able to start saving money for a down payment to buy their own home. But if they’re paying so much money in rent, they don’t have enough money for a down payment, let’s try to help.”

Live Local, a package that Passidomo shepherded through the Legislature last year, tried to attack the problem from three sides: For young people hoping to buy their first home, the Hometown Heroes program offers interest-free second mortgages of up to \$35,000 toward a down payment. For developers, there are tax credits and also tax breaks for new construction that sets aside units for people making under certain income thresholds.

The Florida Housing Finance Corporation (FHFC), created by the Legislature nearly four decades ago, is tasked with making it all work. Passidomo is a “once-in-a-generation leader, legislatively,” says FHFC Chairman Ryan Benson.

Benson is co-owner of A. Vernon Allen Builder, a custom home builder in Naples and Sanibel. He also serves as first vice president/president elect for the Florida Home Builders Association. Passidomo brought a wealth of knowledge to the effort, given her and John’s legal careers in real estate and development, he says. “Her institutional knowledge on all the aspects” in the package was “essential to create the legislation.”

The Hometown Heroes program alone has doled out \$200 million since 2023. It took only 51 days this year for 6,100 families who earn up to 150% of their county’s area median to qualify for help buying their first homes, the FHFC says.

Hello gorgeous

How do you measure what it means to have found the love of your life? And where does one find solace when you wake up one day with your soul mate, only to have him taken away by day’s end?

After 45 years of marriage, and mere weeks after suffering shattering heartbreak, when Kathleen Passidomo speaks about her husband, she smiles and laughs.

For her it was love at first sight. He took a little more time. Passidomo’s roommate at Stetson University College of Law was “blonde, blue-eyed, gorgeous,” and she remembers lots of male classmates making excuses to stop by their dorm room. So when John Passidomo knocked on their door one day, she figured he was just another suitor.

Then, “he tried to sell me his notes,” she remembers with a laugh. “People would take notes in class and then sell them to the class behind them.” But she wasn’t really listening to what he said. “I was smitten. It took my breath away. So he’s just standing there. My mouth was dry. I couldn’t say anything. He said, ‘well, I have these notes.’ The only thing I could say was ‘what was your grade?’”

She didn’t buy the notes, but they became friends, she waiting patiently as he “was dating people all over the place because he was so gorgeous.” After one breakup, a mutual friend asked John ‘why don’t you date Kathleen? She’s perfect.’ And I’m sitting there going, ‘Yeah, why don’t you date me?’” she says with another laugh.

Bicameral Cooperation

Outgoing Florida House Speaker Paul Renner says he feels “blessed” to have had Kathleen Passidomo as his Senate counterpart, calling her “an antidote to all of the cynicism that is out there.”

Although Republicans have dominated the Florida Legislature for years, that hasn’t led to a trusting, collegial relationship between the two chambers, and relations often fell into gamesmanship and distrust. “Kathleen and I both committed to each other — and kept those commitments — that we would not do that. We were transparent

about our priorities. What became important to her became important to me, and vice-versa. That’s why we worked so well together. That’s why we accomplished so much.”



They graduated law school in 1978 and married the next year, moving to Naples to set up respective law practices. John worked on development and zoning while Kathleen thrived in a real estate and business practice. They used their wedding money to buy a condominium.

She was only the third woman lawyer in Naples. She remembers being talked down to by some male counterparts. She made a point to let it go. “Look, I’m a lawyer and I’m going to do the best for my clients and I’m not going to worry about that,” she thought. “I never worried about that whole thing. Sure, I had to work harder, but ultimately, I was as successful as any of the guys.”

Their early careers were so hectic that Catarina remembers sitting her parents down when she was about 10 to tell them “‘you guys work too much. We need to have more family dinners.’ ... And they took it to heart.” Kathleen started cooking more and family dinners “just became an event. They pretty much always were fabulous and special and really fun.”

Theirs was the house where their friends would hang out, says Francesca, “because they were so non-judgmental.” If she and her friends came home in the middle of the night, her mom would “greet us at first with disdain, and then she’d quickly turn on the oven.”

The Passidomos gave their daughters space, letting them play in the mangroves and on a seawall as kids. “But then when we came back, they were there with the food and there with comfort, but not in a helicopter parent way,” says Francesca, a partner at the Naples firm Coleman, Yovanovitch, Koester. “It was more, go do your own thing and we’ll be here when you need us to be here.”

Each devoted considerable time to pro bono work, and the Collier County Judiciary honored the couple in 2019 with the Donald E. Van Koughnet Lion of the Law Award for Professionalism recognizing legal skill, character and public service.

John served on the Naples City Council and was vice mayor in the early 1990s. Their mom’s move to politics, therefore, seemed like a natural progression, says Catarina, now a Washington and Lee University Associate Professor of Environmental Studies. “I think her timing was really telling. I think my mom could have been involved much sooner but she waited until we were all out of the house,” she says. “She’s clearly a natural.”

Passidomo accompanied her daughter Catarina, her son-in-law and her two grandsons, William and Emilio, on a trip last July that John had planned to a Colorado dude ranch. It was “bittersweet,” she says, but she’s determined to do all the things he can’t.



Passidomo was ending a term as Collier County Bar president when the 2008 housing crisis triggered a tsunami of foreclosures. She put together a task force to provide pro bono support in hopes of keeping people in their homes, but “if you don’t have any income, you can’t pay anything.” The task force shifted its focus to trying to protect people’s credit ratings even after a foreclosure. “If they’ve got that hanging over their head, the deficiency judgment, they’re never going to be able to get back on their feet.”

When she ran for and won an open state House seat in 2010, Passidomo planned to go to Tallahassee, pass a law and return home. “It took me three years to get that bill passed. By then I was kind of into it.”

She won her state Senate seat in 2016 and has been seen as one of the business community’s most reliable allies. Passidomo is “one of those rare people — I’ve never heard her once say a bad thing about someone else,” says Florida Chamber of Commerce President Mark Wilson. “She’ll say,

After getting elected to the Florida House, Passidomo planned to go to Tallahassee, pass a law and return home. “It took me three years to get that bill passed,” she says. “By then, I was kind of into it.”

‘we’re not doing that,’ or ‘here’s what we need to be doing,’ but it’s never personal. It’s hard to find in politics anymore, someone who just says ‘what’s the right thing to do?’ She’s been that since the day I’ve known her.”

Passidomo consistently has a 100% voting record on Chamber issues, and the group honored her in 2018 as its Most Valuable Legislator. She spent years pushing tort changes, the Chamber’s top issue, before it finally passed last year. Associated Industries of Florida has given her its Champion for Business Award six times, including this year “for her steadfast efforts to rework Florida’s access to health care.”

Her decisions aren’t always popular. Passidomo has resisted calls for a special session to address huge assessments facing many condominium owners. In 2023, legislators expanded the number of aging buildings needing 30-year safety inspections in the wake of the 2021 Champlain Towers South collapse in Miami Beach. And she defends legislative “preemption,” stripping local governments of power to impose regulations and ordinances on things like vacation rental properties or protections for workers during extreme heat. “Every time we do it, I cringe,” she says. “But I realize that it has to be done. One of my guiding principles is if a local government passes an ordinance that impacts others, somebody has to be the arbiter — and that has to be the state.”

Passidomo is still grappling with what her future looks like without John by her side. In June, she retrieved his

personal effects from his law office. “That said it’s over. ... I was in denial until then. I kept thinking he was going to come back.”

She seems determined to push through the pain. Last Christmas, she and John paid for a July trip to a Colorado dude ranch for Catarina, her husband and their 10- and 6-year-old sons. John had done all the research. “After he died, it felt impossible to imagine going without him,” Catarina says. At the hospital in Utah, her mother made it clear that the trip was still on. She recalls her mother saying, “People are going to try to make this about us and about losing him. But what breaks my heart is that he will not have the opportunity to keep living like he wanted to. He just lived so passionately.”


“She immediately said we need to do all of the things that he can’t do. So we decided to go on this trip. It was awesome. It was sad. It was hard for her ... But she was able to spend a lot of time with my kids and see them fall in love with horseback riding.”

“It was bittersweet,” Passidomo says. The boys’ having fun on the horses “was a joy to see,” but the trip had been “something John was so excited about.”

She read a lot about the grieving process and the many firsts she must face — the first wedding anniversary without him came in September. Next month will be the first Christmas.

“Every day is a first,” she says. “Today is the first day I went to our favorite restaurant, or today is the first day I’m on an airplane without him. People are telling me it takes two years to really come to terms with it.”

And there will be other happy, yet bittersweet moments. Youngest daughter Gabriella, an attorney serving on the Florida Public Service Commission, is getting married in Naples this month, with a party set for next month in Tallahassee. The party will include a tribute for John Passidomo.

“It’s the beginning of her life, and I want her to enjoy every minute of it,” Passidomo says. “She’s going to miss her Dad. I’m going to miss John.” 

Passidomo cherishes this last photo she took of John in Zion National Park the morning before they went to Utah’s Bryce Canyon National Park. It had snowed the night before, she says, and John uncharacteristically asked her to take his picture. “He was so happy,” she recalls.

