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NJ lawmakers look back at legacy of Sen. Ted Kennedy

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He was known as the "Liberal Lion" and a "liberal's liberal," but political watchers and admirers of the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy said it was his willingness to compromise on the issues he felt the most strongly about that made him an effective and legendary legislator.

To local elected figures, from Congress down to the county level, the Massachusetts Democrat, who died late Tuesday at the age of 77 after battling a brain tumor, was more than just the last surviving brother in the ill-fated Kennedy political clan. He was a man who cared about people, health care and civil rights.

Kennedy, known as Ted, was elected to the Senate in 1962, when his brother John F. Kennedy was president, and served longer than all but two senators in history. He was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor in May 2008 and underwent surgery and a grueling regimen of radiation and chemotherapy.

U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone, D-6th Dist., remembers asking to meet with Kennedy about 20 years ago. The freshman congressman, who still represents a large portion of Middlesex County, was surprised when Kennedy invited him to his office.

"He was always a person who wanted to meet and befriend his colleagues," Pallone said, adding that that camaraderie helped Kennedy reach out for support whenever he wanted to accomplish something on Capitol Hill.

"He may have been the standard bearer for liberals but he was also very much interested in passing legislation even though he couldn't always get what he wanted," Pallone said. "I certainly learned that over the years, that to pass a bill sometimes you have to seize the moment and not worry so much about the ideology."

U.S. Rep. Rush Holt, D-12th Dist., representing southern Middlesex County, met Kennedy in 1963 and believed he had ridden the coattails of his family's name into elected office. Holt now says he was wrong.

"He had a deep commitment to freedom, fairness, and justice, and his persistent defense of the 'little guy' was absolutely genuine," Holt said Wednesday in a statement. "The result is a body of legislation that has brought equality, justice, and opportunity to millions."

Kennedy was born into privilege but became a voice for those who were not.

He was a supporter of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

He was responsible for bringing the Immigration Act of 1965 to the Senate floor.

"(It) was a breakthrough in how immigrants were selected for entry to the United States," state Assemblyman Upendra J. Chivukula, D-Franklin, said in a statement. "Sen. Kennedy's legislation has had a profound influence on immigration reform and the demographic make-up of our country — helping make us a great nation of immigrants."

Kennedy also supported the Occupational Health and Safety Act to protect workers, the Meals on Wheels Act, and the Women, Infants, and Children Nutrition Program, or WIC, which assists low-income mothers.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act, a bill introduced by Kennedy, was signed into law, barring discrimination against any qualified individual with a disability in the workplace.

In 1969, he called for national health care for all Americans, an idea that would become a contentious national issue in the months before his death.

"While we might be tempted to regret that Sen. Kennedy did not live to see universal health care — the 'cause of my life' he called it — we should all rejoice in all of the great, enormous good that Sen. Kennedy accomplished while he was here with us, and honor his memory by redoubling our commitment to making that cause a reality now," Gov. Jon Corzine said.

Outside the Beltway, Kennedy's life was marred by family tragedy and personal scandal.

Kennedy's eldest brother, Joseph, was killed in a plane crash in World War II. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in 1963. His brother Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was shot dead on a presidential campaign stop in Los Angeles in 1968. Nephew John F. Kennedy Jr. was killed in a plane crash at age 38, along with his wife, in 1999.

On the night of July 18, 1969, Kennedy drove his car off a bridge into a pond on Chappaquiddick Island, on Martha's Vineyard, leaving Mary Jo Kopechne, 28, in the back seat. Her submerged body was found 10 hours later.

Kennedy, then 37, pleaded guilty to leaving the scene and received a two-month suspended sentence and a year's probation. A judge determined there was "probable cause to believe that Kennedy operated his motor vehicle negligently," contributing to Kopechne's death.

The accident is believed to have doomed his presidential bid in 1980, when he ran against President Jimmy Carter for the party's nomination.

John Weingart, the associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, said Kennedy went from being widely ridiculed as an incompetent womanizer and a boozehound to becoming "widely considered one of the best senators in U.S. history by the end of his career."

"One of his legacies is his evolution as a person and what a positive symbol and story that is to already be in public life with nobody expecting anything from you, and to go from that to near universal regard for his commitment and effectiveness — whether or not you agree with his policies," Weingart said.

INSPIRATION:

Middlesex County Sheriff and county Democratic Party Chairman Joseph C. Spicuzzo, 64, recalled introducing Kennedy during a reception for former Gov. James E. McGreevey, then still a candidate, at the Sheraton in East Brunswick in 2001.

"You know people sometimes complain about politics and politicians, but this man really ... embodied politicians doing good things for people," he said.

Assemblyman Patrick J. Diegnan, D-South Plainfield, remembers Kennedy, a corpulent figure with a mane of white hair, being "larger than life" when he met him in Camden in 2005.

"I try to model myself after him and I hope more folks do so," Diegnan, 60, said in reference to Kennedy's bipartisan efforts, which he believes will be missed in the months ahead. "This country's debate about health insurance has been reduced to a shouting match and name-calling. It's not the way a productive process takes place."

Kennedy may have reached across the aisle at times, but he was always a Democrat — right to the end.

"I was shocked when I saw him at the (2008 Democratic presidential) convention on TV," Middlesex County Freeholder Director Stephen J. "Pete" Dalina said. "I could see how he was suffering. He was still there for Democratic party."

Gannett Washington Bureau and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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