

NOVEMBER 12, 2002

HONORING PAUL WELLSTONE

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- I have a big hole in my heart, and I think it is reflective of the hole that is left now in the political landscape, a space that was occupied uniquely by Paul Wellstone. I feel great sorrow and great gratitude; sorrow for the loss of a close friend and colleague, and gratitude for having had the opportunity to know and work with Paul Wellstone and his wife, his life-long partner, Sheila Wellstone.□

Paul and Sheila Wellstone touched many, many lives; literally tens of thousands of Americans considered themselves to be their close friends and partners in the effort to make America better. My husband and I enjoyed spending time with Paul, listening to his stories and jokes and planning strategy and organizing. Paul and Sheila were always open and friendly, and always eager to act on their beliefs.□

In Chicago this weekend, we will hold a memorial service to honor their lives. Similar memorial services are being held in towns and cities across this country. Paul L Wellstone was the people's Senator, not just Minnesota's Senator, the one you could always count on to push for economic and social justice.□

Paul used to talk frequently about the concerns raised by people eating in the cafes and diners in Minnesota. He brought those concerns to the floor of the Senate, speaking for his constituents and for families everywhere. He knew what it was like to deal with mental illness and discrimination in the health care system. He made it his job to end inequality in care and pass comprehensive mental health parity. He knew what it was like to lack health care coverage and to be unable to afford medical treatment for a child or grandparent, and so he made it his job to win universal access to affordable and quality health care.□

He listened to family farmers struggling to survive in the shadow of agribusiness, and he made it his job to speak for those farmers. He heard about discrimination and lack of opportunity, and he made it a priority to break down barriers to give every person the right to be productive and secure and to protect the rights of working men and women.□ He listened to Sheila about the horrors of domestic violence, and together they worked to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act and to stop the abuse that threatens women and children.□

As a teacher, Paul focused on the power of education to improve our lives. He fought for better teachers and better schools from early childhood development through the university level. He embraced these weighty issues with joy and exuberance. He was called the happy warrior. He was never apologetic or defensive, always bold and clear and, to many of us, thrilling.□

Above all, Paul was proud to be an organizer. He believed with every fiber of his being in the power of people to make change and to win social and economic justice. He taught us to strive for the very best in ourselves and in our communities. He inspired us to do more than we thought was possible because his vision of what was achievable was so powerful. He showed us that we can listen to our consciences, do what is right and take courageous stands on issues from welfare to Iraq and still win elections.

The people of Minnesota respected him and loved him and mourn him because he lived and voted his values. Paul Wellstone changed lives. He changed thousands of lives, young people and old people alike. He empowered people. He was a friend, and I want to end with Paul Wellstone as a friend. I have two friends in my district who loved Paul with all their hearts; Harvey and Norma Mader were good friends of Paul and Sheila Wellstone. For a long time before Paul was elected to Congress, Harvey and Norma Mader were their friends. They live in my district, but they were prepared to go to Minnesota for the election as senior citizen advocates. Their lives very much revolve around progressive politics, and Paul Wellstone was their hero and friend. And Paul would call them up on the telephone and say, How is Norma, how is she feeling? How are things going, Harvey?

It was common for Paul on a regular basis just to check in with his friends. And when I was at that memorial service in Minnesota, I talked to a number of people who said Paul called me last week. He heard that my son was sick or he heard that I was having a test at the hospital, and he just called to see how I was.

I realize that so many of us who get so busy with our work here and the weightiness of our work here sometimes sacrifice ordinary friendships, but Paul Wellstone managed to do it all. He managed to maintain those friendships all over the country. That is what I heard. It meant so much to Harvey and Norma Mader, it meant so much to all of the people that he cared so much about, and I think that says something so special about what kind of person that he was.

Although Paul and Sheila are no longer here physically, the partnership that we have with them will continue. Through our commitment to their vision of America, Paul and Sheila will always have an enormous impact on our Nation and on our future.