

Senator Paul Wellstone: Biography 1944-2002

“I dare to imagine a country where every child I hold in my hands, are all God’s children, regardless of the color of their skin, regardless of whether they’re boy or girl, regardless of religion, regardless of rich or poor, that every child I hold in my hands, will have the same chance to reach her full potential or his full potential. That is the goodness of our country. That is the essence of the American dream.”

(Paul Wellstone)

Paul David Wellstone was the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia, born in 1944 and raised in Arlington, Virginia. His mother was a cafeteria worker and his father was a writer and federal employee. His father left Russia shortly before the 1917 Stalinist purges took the lives of Paul’s grandparents. Both parents instilled in their son a commitment to justice and civil action.

Wellstone went on to complete his PhD in political science from North Carolina, and at age 24 accepted a teaching position at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. As a professor, Wellstone focused on questions of economic justice and poverty, and began engaging in local community organizing projects in rural areas. “It was clear,” wrote one of his friends and former colleagues, “that he was less concerned about academic political science than about political science directly serving people’s needs.”

Excerpts from an Historical Essay on Minnesota’s 2002 U.S. Senate Election

By Christopher N. Ruszkowski

On the morning of Friday, October 25, 2002, the state and the nation lost U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone to a plane crash near Eveleth, Minnesota, along with his wife, Sheila, his daughter, Marcia, and five others. The Democrat’s twelve years as senator ended suddenly and unexpectedly that morning amidst near-freezing temperatures on the Iron Range, and also amidst a vigorous campaign with Republican Norm Coleman, the former mayor of St. Paul.

The historic events that followed Wellstone’s death propelled Minnesota into the national spotlight like never before, and the series of events that unfolded were as dynamic and provocative as the fallen senator himself.

Professor Wellstone Goes to Washington

Paul Wellstone was the son of Russian immigrants, a college wrestler, a fiery political speaker, and a mentor to generations of young activists; he spent twenty-one years as a political science professor at Carleton College in Northfield. He surprised political pundits in 1990, defeating incumbent Rudy Boschwitz by running a grassroots campaign featuring humorous, low-budget campaign ads and whistle-stop tours in his signature green school bus. He won a re-match of the contest in 1996.

Liberal Champion

In the U. S. Senate, Wellstone served at various times on committees for foreign relation; health, education and pensions; small business; Indian affairs; veterans’ affairs; labor and human resources; and energy. He fought for universal health care, federal programs for physically and mentally disabled, environmental preservation, increased funding for public education, international human rights, and economic and social justice.

Along the way, he formed alliances with public servants across the political aisle and formed life-long bonds with constituents from every walk of life because he always was friendly, responsive and respectful to everyone. Often he was criticized for a lack of pragmatism and opinions that tended to divide rather than unite. Yet he had a reputation for staying true to his convictions, and ultimately people from all backgrounds respected him for that.