

Paul Wellstone, 1944-2002 A Democratic Hero

It was probably sometime in 2002 that I read an account of Paul Wellstone's career in the University of North Carolina Alumni Review. Although I had followed his career in the U.S. Senate with interest and admiration, I had not known that he had done both his undergraduate and graduate study at Carolina, my alma mater. He graduated in three years, was undefeated on the wrestling team for two years; married Shelia, his high school sweetheart and fathered their first child; and he was just twenty years old. He went on to complete his PhD in political science in 1969 and accepted a teaching position at Carlton College in Northfield Minnesota when he was just twenty-four.

"At Carleton Wellstone immersed himself in campus activism by organizing protests, criticizing the school's administration for its ties to corporate interests, and speaking out on issues affecting the community. He created controversy within the faculty and administration for his unorthodox style, but is remembered as a passionate professor with an uncommon ability to relate to students."

In 1982 Wellstone ran for state auditor, an office for which he was admittedly ill-suited, and lost to the incumbent. However the campaign gave him an opportunity to develop his oratorical skills and campaign techniques and these served him well seven years later when he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. He had little money and no organized backing but he went directly to the voters by knocking on doors, making phone calls and traveling the state in an old bus. Against all odds he won the Democratic nomination and went on to defeat the Republican incumbent, Rudy Boschwitz.

In the Senate Wellstone was an outspoken voice for justice. He pushed for lobbying reform, health care for all, environmental protection and he presented the case for America's working families with skill and passion.

When I read the account of his life and career in the UNC Alumni Review I wrote the Senator explaining that I was a UNC graduate who didn't feel that I was being represented in the Senate by our Republican incumbents and asking if he would be my honorary Senator. I received a handwritten note saying that he would be pleased to be my Senator. Some months later I had the opportunity to meet with the Senator when he came to Raleigh advocating for campaign finance reform. That was an honor and a privilege that I shall always treasure.

Unfortunately Senator Wellstone, his wife and daughter were tragically killed in an airplane crash in 2002, but he remains one of my heroes. I am able to support his memory by contributing to the Wellstone Action Fund established by his sons to train, empower, and mobilize a network of progressive people and organizations to work for peace and justice in the tradition of their parents, Paul and Shelia Wellstone.

Cyrus B. King