

Sen. Robert C. Byrd: A Tribute

6/28/10--Today at approximately 3:00 a.m. the world lost a giant Leader; West Virginia lost its greatest advocate; I lost my friend and "Uncle"; and Heaven welcomed a devout Follower.

Sen. Robert Carlyle Byrd of West Virginia will long be studied for his keen mind, absolute devotion, and empowered leadership. But he will also continue to inspire, by example, those of us who loved and honored him. He was empowered by a belief in things unseen and by his mission to raise up the down-trodden. He never forgot his heritage, nor apologized for it. He wore it, instead, as a badge of honor. He rose above adversity and triumphed over suffering. The loss of Erma, his beloved wife, and his grandson, never dimmed his passion for service although it pained him to his very core. His ability to rise above poverty and loss reminds each of us that we're here for a Purpose, and we must not give up or give in. He never did.

As I listen to the tributes, I cannot help but reflect that our relationship was more personal than political. My trips to Washington, D.C., were received as if I were the most important person on his schedule. His Staff would even bring him to his Office from the Senate Floor when I arrived. He always listened to my concerns and addressed them with me. When I was working in the area of school violence, he held a Youth Forum on school violence and invited me to attend. When there was no place for my Mother, a long-term ventilator patient, he created one. When I wrote to him, he wrote back, and I have many letters from him. How one man, who acted on the national and international scene and was courted by Presidents and other dignitaries, gave me such a priority place in his life is an enigma to me. But he did.

He sent a letter on the occasion of our wedding in 2005, and his Staff reported that they recognized my husband from the wedding video played in his Office. When I visited him, he always told everyone present how, when I was young, I cried when he was in a car accident and the media reported that one had been killed, but did not say who. He loved all the people of West Virginia, and I still feel honored that when he visited my parents while I was in college, he and Erma stayed in my bedroom. It became known in our house as the "Byrd Room".

Erma was a quiet and unassuming woman. I last saw her at West Virginia University Law School when Sen. Byrd spoke for three hours on the line item veto. I remember that when Sen. Byrd came off the stage after speaking, the press surrounded him. When he saw me, we hugged. You could feel the shock in the room. He was always loyal to those he loved, and we were loyal to him.

Our long distance relationship remained special to me, and I believe, to him. My dresser drawer full of letters is testimony to his attention to every detail. His Staff remained with him for many years, and he loved them as they loved him. The love was palpable at every visit to see him.

On his 80th birthday, I tried to express my admiration and appreciation to him by way of a poem which I include here. However, in spite of my best attempts, I have no words to convey how deep are my feelings for this great man of shared origin.

“Special to Me”

When I was quite young you entered my life
With exuberance you taught me to live
You were bold and committed and exciting to see
And I learned about service through you.
Political races, discussions, alive
With caring for people anew
And I recognized early you were special to all
But I knew you were special to me.

You entered the ring of politics filled
With enthusiasm and optimism of youth
You were bold and aggressive, you already knew
There was much people needed from you.
You worked hard, fought hard, inside you were sure,
You knew you must always succeed
You were special to all, for all you served well,
You had always been special to me.

West Virginians are proud of their state, but alas
Times had not always treated them well
You took on the challenge, brought quality of life
And still you take on their cause.
They look to you now because they have learned
They can trust in your steadfast support
You are special to them as they're special to you
And you've always been special to me.

So now as you celebrate eighty strong years
Of serving your country and state
West Virginians know of your life spent for them
Always loyal and fearless and sure.
Your heart is as big as God ever made
Your loyalty to Him is complete
You're a model for all to love and admire
And you'll always be special to me.

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With love and admiration, “Susan”