TRIBUTE TO THE LATE BRUCE F. VENTO

HON. BETTY McCOLLUM
MINNESOTA
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, March 29, 2001

Ms. McCOLLUM. Mr. Speaker, I submit to the RECORD my tribute to a wonderful man; an outstanding Member of this body for 24 years; my Congressman, my teacher, my mentor, and dear friend—the late Bruce F. Vento.

Because of his leadership the working families of Minnesota—of America—are stronger. Our land and our lakes, our rivers and our streams are cleaner; our air is better. He gave us, our children, and future generations the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and the Minnesota National Wildlife Refuge—thousands and thousands of acres of pristine environment that will fill our lives with weekends where the only sounds we hear will be “the sounds of the canoe paddle dipping, the winds wafting, and the birds singing…”

When we reach the Boundary Waters, and the Minus, our children, and future generations the streams are cleaner; our air is better. He gave us a guardian angel always and forever teaching. Thank you, Bruce.

Bruce welcomed and worked tenaciously to bring our newest neighbors fully into our community—the Lao-Hmong. Because he did so, St. Paul and our State is a richer, more tolerant, and more prosperous community.

Bruce Vento was an embodiment of public service; a civics lesson personified. Each day he rose without fanfare, “to make people’s lives better, to provide opportunity—to give them hope.”

When I first met Bruce, he was my Congressman. He quickly became a friend and a mentor to a young Mom who sought to make a difference in her community. Bruce taught by example, and his example was always to do the right thing. We shared a belief that if you touch your heart, and told him to teach one difference you made in my life…”

Mr. Vento, you may not remember me—but I was a student of yours—by example. So don’t think that a difference you made in my life…” Those touched his heart, and told him to teach one more time the joys, the value, the necessity of giving of one’s self—the essence of Bruce Vento, the public servant.

I am deeply honored and humbled to stand here today as Bruce’s successor. I am committed to represent as ably as this great man did the constituents of Minnesota’s Fourth Congressional District. As I cast my votes here in this august Chamber, I do so with a clear and present knowledge that I do indeed have a forebear who forever guided me with his compassion, his wisdom and his strength. Forever teaching. Thank you, Bruce.

Mr. Speaker, four items that capture the essence of Congressman Bruce F. Vento: a man who represented all of us from the Eastside of life who believe that hard work, family values, educational opportunity, and a commitment to a greater community are the keys to a happy and successful life.

From the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, June 30, 2000

BRUCE VENTO—JUST ANOTHER GUY FROM THE EASTSIDE WHO WENT ON TO DO GREAT THINGS

(By Garrison Kellar)

There was a dinner in Washington, D.C., Tuesday night to honor a guy from St. Paul’s East Side.

The president dropped by and dozens of U.S. representatives, Republicans and Democrats. And at the end, when the guy from the East Side took the stage he got a long, long standing ovation. You could have gone around the room and stolen everyone’s dessert, they were so busy applauding him.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Vento, a modest man and a hard worker, is stepping down after 24 years representing the 4th Congressional District, and I must admit I voted for him all years because I’m a yellow-dog Democrat. So now I’m a little taken aback to see what a good man he is who I unthinkingly supported all these years.

This isn’t how our civics teachers taught us to exercise the franchise, but a person doesn’t have oceans of time to study up on candidates. Mr. Vento, when he was sufficiently far in his life to speak once years ago, speak very movingly about the problem of homelessness and about the importance of wilderness, and that was good enough for me. But if he had stood on his hind legs and barked, I still would have voted for him.

Wilderness preservation and the plight of the homeless are not issues that pay a big political bonus. You become a wilderness advocate and you’re going to be hung in effigy一定程度上，甚至被拔掉整齐的假发。Homeless people tend not to turn out in numbers at the polls.

But Mr. Vento applied himself to the issues he cared about, did his homework, made the round of his colleagues, carried the water, dug the ditches, fought the good fights, made the promises, made the legislation that became law and that made a real difference in the world. And I’m not sure how many of us in St. Paul are aware of this.

There have been only three congressmen from St. Paul in my memory, and that covers 50 years. Gene McCarthy, Joe Karth, Bruce Vento—all DFLers, all good men and all of them got to Congress on the strength of yellow-dog Democrats like me. They got re-elected simply by doing their job, representing working people, speaking the conscience of the Democratic Party. They were the nuts and bolts of Congress. A political party serves a big function that the newspapers can’t even begin to capture. And why are they called political parties? Because it can produce a party that has reason to exist, and if it can’t, then it doesn’t. Simple as that. Then it fades, as the DFL has. People say it’s inevitable for political parties to fade, part of the loss of the sense of community, blah blah blah, that people are cynical about politics and more interested in litigation and media than in doing their job.

Yet we are poorer for the loss of parties and the devaluation of endorsement.

Bruce Vento never could’ve gotten elected in a media-driven campaign, the sort in which high-priced consultants and media buyers spend $15 million bucks to make the candidate into a beautiful illusion.

Mr. Vento is the wrong man for that kind of politics. His eyebrows are too big; he isn’t cool enough. He’s a modest and principled and hard-working guy, but you couldn’t put this over in a 30-second commercial. He managed to get to Congress because there was a strong DFL Party that endorsed him, and so very often the people pulled the lever for Mr. Vento the wherewithal to be a great Congressman. He who, being a true East Sider, never told us he was. But which I now think he was.

Unknownly, we did something great in sending him there. And our partisan loyalty gave him the freedom to take on thankless tasks, like protecting wilderness and dealing with the homeless.

I sat in the back at Mr. Vento’s dinner and thought what a shock it is when you realize this country is full of people your own age. You go along for years thinking it’s being run by jowly old guys in baggy suits and then you see that the jowly old guys are people you went to school with.

Mr. Vento is about my age, and I feel for him. He is fighting lung cancer and it has taken its toll on him. He looks haggard but game. His three boys were at the dinner in Washington, and their wives, and the event felt like a real valedictory. If Mr. Vento had died making us all feel good about our pudding, it wouldn’t have taken much.

But he was upbeat and talking about the future and about national parks and the development of the hundred million acres of wilderness. “All we need to do is take this new knowledge and apply it to public policy…” and
thanking everybody and grinning, and you had to admire him for his command of the occasion.

A man who is desperately ill and on his way out of public life stages a desperate fundraising drive to raise money for a scholarship fund for teachers. Bruce Vento was a man of great bravery and devotion and foresight who represented his district proudly and solely in Congress, whether we knew it or not.

[From the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, Oct. 11, 2000]

HE WORE A BLUER CHAIR AND A WHITE HAT
Rep. Bruce F. Vento’s last Christmas card pictures a smiling, healthy appearing grandfather at a baseball outing with the little folks. There’s no hint of his lofty position as a member of Congress from Minnesota’s 4th District. The card is an ordinary photo holiday greeting hand-signed simply with “Bruce.” The image is a wonderful one for remembering Vento, who died Tuesday at age 60 of lung cancer.

Vento was a straightforward man, rooted in St. Paul from first to last. He was a talker and a fighter, a partisan and a patriot, a union man and sophisticated scientist. Vento was the only congressman a generation of 4th District residents has ever known. He was first elected in 1976 and served 12 terms.

In the majority and as a powerful chair of the Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands for more than 19 years, Vento reached the peak of his national influence on the future of the country’s wild places. His work there resulted in protection of hundreds of thousands of acres of public land ranging from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness to the Minnesota National Wildlife Refuge and the establishment of more than 300 laws preserving the environment.

He served as chair of the House Task Force during the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s. Vento was a champion for programs to shelter the homeless, for human stewardship in the national parks. Vento was the Star’s first man, as great his resume always notes that he worked as a laborer, a mailroom clerk for this newspaper, a shop steward and a teacher before getting a job that gave him a chance to lead. Those include oversight of all America’s public lands and helping to rescue the financial system from the ruins of the savings and loan debacle.

Vento’s career in Congress, and before that in the Minnesota Legislature, represent an old-fashioned sense of public service in a new-fashioned and too-slick political era. He knew what private-public partnerships were before the concept became a sound bite for the ambitious. And his legacy of service to Congress, the family, the community and the nation is being honored by creation of a park in his name.

Vento was a man of great heart. He was a kind person who always had time for the young and the needy with a personal passion to improve the quality of life. He has gone about his work always with great heart and mastery of the arcane art of legislating.

Vento was an Old Democrat in a New Democrat era. His reliable fidelity to ideals and to his fellow Minnesota Democrat, Jim Oberstar, who noted, “I lost my wife, Jo, to breast cancer, so Bruce’s disclosure that he is fighting cancer hits close to home. Bruce has spent the past 24 years in Congress fighting for working people, and now he is in a fight for his life.”

Even though they often clashed over the issue of federal control of northern Minnesota’s pristine Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, Oberstar called Vento “a dear friend of mine” and “an exceptional public servant.”

Rep. Jim Leach (R-Iowa), chairman of the Banking and Financial Services Committee on which Vento serves, praised him for his leadership on federal banking policy. He called his former head teacher and union shop steward “a citizen-educator: an educator who came to Capitol Hill and gave Congress a civics lesson.”

Bruce Vento is a man of great bravery and devotion and foresight who represented his district proudly and solely in Congress, whether we knew it or not.

The 59-year-old St. Paul lawmaker’s announcement that he will end a 30-year public service career, which began when he was elected to the Minnesota Legislature in 1971, triggered an outpouring of grief, praise and concern from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. President Clinton and Vice President Gore, who came to Congress the same year as Vento, also issued statements of praise and concern.

None was more poignant than that from his fellow Minnesota Democrat, Jim Oberstar, who noted, “I lost my wife, Jo, to breast cancer, so Bruce’s disclosure that he is fighting cancer hits close to home. Bruce has spent the past 24 years in Congress fighting for working people, and now he is in a fight for his life.”

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[From the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, Feb. 8, 2000]

Godspeed, Congressman Vento.

[From the Hill, Feb. 8, 2000]

GODSPEED, CONGRESSMAN VENTO
The premature departure from Congress of Rep. Bruce Vento (D-Minn.) because he has been diagnosed with lung cancer will deprive the House of Representatives of one of its most dedicated, effective and popular members.

Vento, who is retiring in December after 24 years in Congress, stunned and saddened his colleagues when he disclosed last week that he has a type of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos. His doctors at Minnesota’s famed Mayo Clinic have recommended an aggressive course of treatment that will make it impossible for him to run for a 13th term.

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