

Message Kennedy leaves for America: 'Never give up'

Written by Hazel Trice Edney, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Despite the fact that he is now gone, honored by America after dying of brain cancer August 25, Sen. Edward M. “Ted” Kennedy leaves a message that will continue to resound. That’s the one that says, ‘Never give up’ the fight on behalf of the oppressed.

President Barack Obama rendered the eulogy Saturday.

"The world will long remember their son Edward as the heir to a weighty legacy; a champion for those who had none; the soul of the Democratic Party; and the lion of the United States Senate -- a man who graces nearly 1,000 laws, and who penned more than 300 laws himself," Obama said. "We can still hear his voice bellowing through the Senate chamber, face reddened, fist pounding the podium, a veritable force of nature, in support of health care or workers' rights or civil rights."

Kennedy's persistence through more than 40 years of service will set an example for lawmakers and activists for years to come.

"The message he leaves is 'Never give up,'" said Julian Bond , chairman of the NAACP, in an NNPA interview. "I just heard somebody on the radio describe his many attempts to pass health care in America. He tried, he failed. He tried, he failed. He tried, he failed. And he just kept on going ... White Americans who don't have his courage and his bravery, they have to see him as an example. He was greatly loved - even by those who opposed his policies."

Republicans and Democrats alike expressed words of great admiration for Kennedy, nick-named by his colleagues as the “liberal lion of the Senate.” His legacy and that of his family have long been admired by Americans who nicknamed the dynasty family of Cape Cod, Massachusetts “Camelot”.

His brothers, President John F. Kennedy and Sen. Robert Kennedy, both assassinated during the 1960s, are also known as heroes in the struggle for civil rights. Among the reasons for their popularity was that they sacrificed to give public service although they did not have to.

“It’s important to remember that Senator Kennedy was born into a family of wealth and political power. Yet he dedicated his life to public service on behalf of those less privileged,” recalled Wade Henderson, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. “Despite the tragedies that touched his own life, he never gave up fighting to help America live up to its ideals,” said Wade.

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That dedication started on day one for Sen. Kennedy. In his maiden speech to the U. S. Senate on April 9, 1964, he suddenly switched gears. He said he had planned to speak on "industry and employment" in his home state of Massachusetts.

But, given the controversy raging on the Senate floor, he quickly changed his mind. He was compelled to address H.R.7152, the Civil Rights Act of 1963 on which the Senate had resumed consideration.

"To limit myself to local issues in the face of this great national question would be to demean the seat in which I sit, which has been occupied by some of the most distinguished champions of the cause of freedom," he stated in that maiden address.

Members of the Black Press who have both fought for and covered civil rights for years understand this passion – especially the impact it had on White America which often struggled to understand issues of inequality.

"For them and for the rest of America, his leadership brought hope and enlightenment. And 46 years later, even the reflections of that leadership upon his death continue to engender hope for people of all races, socio-economic backgrounds and walks of life," said Danny Bakewell, Chair of the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

Those issues vehemently covered and advocated by the Black Press - from the Public Accommodations Act, to school desegregation, to Medicare Benefits, to voting rights, to equal economic opportunities, to sickle cell anemia research, to the Martin Luther King holiday, to AIDS education, to the increase of the minimum wage, to his pioneering fight for health care, to his endorsement of then presidential candidate Barack Obama – "Sen. Ted Kennedy carried a torch well ahead of his colleagues. It was the torch of equal justice," according to Dorothy R. Leavell, chair of the National Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation. "The Black Press of America is proudly familiar with that torch. The National Newspaper Publishers Association gives thanks for Sen. Ted Kennedy for fighting the good fight and running a heroic race. We thank him for refusing to bow to the consensus or duck when the blows got hard."

The official funeral services started on the afternoon of Thursday, Aug. 26. His body lay in state at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston until Friday at 3 p.m., followed by a memorial service at 7 at the library. On Saturday morning, a funeral mass was held at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Basilica in Boston. Guests included former Presidents George W Bush, Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter.

His children and niece served as the pallbearers. They were his daughter Kara Kennedy, sons Ted Kennedy, Jr. and U.S. Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy (D-RI) and his niece Caroline Kennedy, daughter of the late President John F. Kennedy. His wife, Vicki, has been by his side since he became ill early last year is considered a possible successor for his Senate seat.

After the funeral, Kennedy's body was carried by plane to Washington. The body was carried by hearse to the front of the U. S. Senate steps at the Capitol, where thousands of his current and former Senate staffers cheered and mourned. The casket was then taken to Arlington National

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Cemetery, where a burial ceremony was held Saturday afternoon.

Whether observing his example from the outside or inside of Congress, Kennedy is still receiving accolades this week, especially for that unwavering stance for those that the Bible calls "the least of these."

"We mourn the loss of a man whose life has shown us the true meaning of 'to whom much is given much is required.' Ted Kennedy always showed great compassion for those less fortunate and dedicated his life to improving the lives of others throughout the world," said U. S. Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Kennedy was also seen as one who also walked the walk of political and racial inclusion, willing to reach across the aisles to make deals with Republicans in order to get a bill passed.

"The key to Kennedy's leadership was engagement. He was willing to sit and listen, but more than that, he invited people with opposing or strident viewpoints to the table," said Laura Murphy, a former senior consultant for the Campaign for a New Domestic Human Rights Agenda, a coalition of more than 50 civil rights groups, and former director of the ACLU's Washington Legislative Office.

She referenced the diverse complexion of Kennedy's Senate staff while many Senate offices are lily white. "He probably holds the Senate record for his early and consistent commitment to a racially integrated staff," Murphy said. "Notable individuals who were his senior advisors include the late Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, Robert Bates who became a successful corporate lobbyist, Charlotte Burrows now at the Department of Justice and Melody Barnes, now head of President Obama's Domestic Policy Council."

Murphy added "These individuals made it easier for us to convey our concerns, because people who had felt racial discrimination were in his midst on a daily basis as policy leaders who could whisper in his ear."

Often loud and passionate as he challenged his colleagues, Kennedy is remembered by traditional civil rights leaders as a lionic figure, who fought alongside them unflinching in his beliefs.

NAACP President and CEO Ben Jealous called him a "friend, ally and civil rights champion."

He said, "Senator Kennedy was a courageous leader for civil and human rights. He championed more civil rights initiatives than any other Senator in U.S. history ... Even as he took his last breath, he was passionately fighting for the health care reform our nation critically needs. His dedication and vision will be profoundly missed."

It was his championing of those so-called "bread and butter" issues of the civil rights community that won the hearts of so many.

"As one of the last U.S. Senators who fought for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Sen. Kennedy stood for many of the same rights that we fight for daily - equality, education, employment, and

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healthcare,” said Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League.

Political wrangling has already begun over who will succeed Kennedy. A new law requires a special election to fill the seat, but that could take months. Therefore, Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick is being pressured by Democrats to appoint a successor until the election can be held in about three months.

Whoever takes the seat will be expected to continue a seemingly endless struggle.

Recalls Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, “Senator Kennedy’s life-long fight for equality and opportunity taught America that the cause of civil rights makes us stronger as a society and a nation. He often liked to end his speeches and writings by saying, ‘America will not be America until we finish the unfinished business of civil rights.’”