

DAVID JENNINGS

1948-2023

EX-GOP leader had a style all his own

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Former Minnesota House Speaker David Jennings was always seeking a challenge: a new job, a home improvement project, a used car or the books and crossword puzzles he devoured weekly.

The charismatic former Marine from south-central Minnesota held numerous high-profile posts. Jennings, who lived in Savage with his wife Susan, was up north at the family cabin working on a drywall project with his son and friends when he died in his sleep May 21 at age 74.

"He was always there to help, whether it was with words or a screwdriver and a hammer," son John Jennings of Hutchinson said. "Whatever you needed, he would be there."

Jennings burst onto the Capitol scene in 1979 as part of a large class of freshman Republicans in the House. Within four years, he was the minority leader. Two years later, the GOP won control and Jennings was elected speaker.

"He raised a lot of money and got a lot of candidates. But Jennings' effectiveness was a question of style," the late state Sen. Duane Benson told the Star Tribune in 1999.

Benson, a Republican senator and minority leader from Lanesboro, said Jennings had swagger.

"He knew where he wanted to go," he said. "He would take his merry band of committee chairmen, who would be chewing their nails while Dave would have his feet up on the desk and his hands behind his head. He gave them confidence."

And Jennings was a magnetic presence. "He would never walk into a room and take it over, but eventually people would come to him," John Jennings said.

Former state Supreme Court Chief Justice Kathleen Blatz was a Bloomington Republican in the same freshman House class as Jennings. "He was a force to be reckoned with," she said. "I've served with a lot of elected people who did really good work for Minnesota, and he was in the top five."

Jennings' tenure as speaker was tumultuous. In 1986, when he gavelled the session to a close at 5:30 a.m., he bolted

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Republican David Jennings joined the state House in 1979 and was elected speaker in 1985.

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◀ **JENNINGS** from BI

from the chamber as members yelled out to be recognized to speak and major bills went unresolved. Later that day, Jennings announced he wouldn't seek re-election.

Instead, Jennings unsuccessfully sought his party's endorsement for governor, losing to state Sen. Cal Lude-man. Jennings then shifted to the private sector, working as an executive at Marshall-based Schwan's Co. for nearly a decade.

Jennings was known for a wide-ranging career marked by abrupt changes in course.

"I always enjoy the learning curve and the challenge of a job," he said in an interview with the Star Tribune. "Once it becomes too routine, I begin to lose focus and I feel guilty getting paid when I am not giving 100 percent."

In 1999, Jennings re-entered public life, joining Reform Party Gov. Jesse Ventura's administration as commerce commissioner. He stayed only a few months before moving on to become CEO of the Minneapolis Regional Chamber

of Commerce.

In January 2002, Jennings became chief operating officer of Minneapolis Public Schools and served as interim superintendent until June 2004. He capped his career by serving as superintendent of the Chaska-based Eastern Carver County School District.

Blatz said she and Jennings became friends while serving together in the Legislature and met for regular lunches when she ran the judiciary. "He was just a great sounding board," she said. They were also in a book club together for more than 20 years.

Jennings read two to three books a week, and Blatz credited him with choosing the club's favorite: "A Gentleman in Moscow" by Amor Towles.

John Jennings said his father was a fan of Brandy Manhattans, outlaw country music and cars, owning dozens over his lifetime.

"He would trade a late-model Volkswagen and get a crappy 1984 Dodge Aries," he said, "then trade that in for a Chevy pickup and then get a

Peugeot."

Born Dec. 17, 1948, in Truman, Minn., just north of the Iowa border, David Michael Jennings was the son of Genevieve (Gustafson) and David H. Jennings.

As a teenager, he bucked his DFL parents by hanging "Barry Goldwater for President" signs all over town and starting a Young Republicans chapter.

Jennings graduated from Truman High School in 1966.

He served in the Marines for five years and was discharged in 1972 as a staff sergeant. In 1976, Jennings earned a political science degree from Minnesota State University, Mankato. He also worked as a carpenter and a congressional aide.

Besides his son and wife, he is survived by his sister Pege Jennings of Lake City, Fla.; his brother Thomas Jennings of Ocean Park, Wash.; stepson Steve Chesley of Dellwood; and four grandchildren.

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