

RICK NOLAN 1943-2024

Passionate politician who 'never forgot where he came from'

By CHRISTA LAWLER
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Less than two weeks before he died, Rick Nolan spent a day on the Iron Range campaigning for Democratic candidate Lorrie Janatopoulos, who is running to represent Minnesota House District 7B in the upcoming election. First he gave a rip-roaring, barnburner of a speech, according to his friend and former aide Jeff Anderson, then he went door-knocking.

No one expected the door-knocking, Anderson said. Nolan insisted.

Nolan, a former Democratic congressman from Minnesota's Eighth District – remembered for his captivating speeches and personal connections, and recognized in 2015 nationally as a top 10 effective lawmaker – has died. He was 80. The cause of death has not yet been made public.

Nolan entered the political ring in the 1960s, left in the 1980s, then returned in the 2010s. Anderson was Nolan's district director and deputy chief of staff in his second political go-round.

Before that, they were both part of a large contingent of Democrats bent on challenging Chip Cravaack, a Republican who had pushed out Rep. Jim Oberstar from the Eighth District congressional seat in 2010.

By the primary election, just three candidates remained. Nolan won – but he brought Anderson with him.

"This guy is the real deal," Anderson remembered thinking the first time he saw Nolan speak. "He could give a speech like no one else. It harkened back to some old-time politicians, their fist and fingers and voices raised. That was Rick. He was so passionate."

A host of Minnesota politicians who knew him offered condolences to Nolan's family on Friday, including Gov. Tim Walz, who said Nolan's speeches could blow the lid off a roof, and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, who lauded his hot dish.

"He'd share sap that he harvested, venison that he hunted, and wild rice



Former Rep. Rick Nolan, with his daughter Katherine Bensen, who died in 2020.

that he gathered with his own hands," she wrote in a public statement.

Minnesota's DFL Chair Ken Martin said Nolan was a champion for northern Minnesota and a dedicated public servant. Former Duluth mayor Don Ness said he had a fire in his belly that "was just about Wellstonian."

In an email, the conservation director of Wilderness Watch remembered the way Nolan celebrated the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, which wasn't always a popular move in the late 1970s.

"Rick knew the value of protecting the area as a wilderness, and always stuck with that belief," said Kevin Proescholdt.

Nolan, a native of Brainerd and at one time a social studies teacher, was first elected to the U.S. House in 1974 – considered one of the "Watergate babies" alongside the surge of dozens of Democrats voted in after President Richard Nixon's resignation.

He left office in 1981. At the time, he planned to start a small model farm in central Minnesota, according to a Star Tribune story.

"I want to read, write, become a good guitar player and enjoy some leisure time," he said at the time. "In short, I'm looking forward to leading a normal life again, doing normal things."

Decades later, he doubled back to politics.

After ousting Cravaack in 2012, he went on to win two more expensive and highly competitive races against Repub-

lican Stewart Mills – including in 2016, when the district favored President Donald Trump.

Nolan had planned to run for re-election in 2018, then changed his mind. At the time, he said he was no longer willing to make the sacrifices necessary to run a competitive congressional campaign.

"When you get in these tough election contests, you've got to give it everything you've got or I don't think you should run," he told the Star Tribune in a February 2018 interview. "That's what I did over the years, and that's how I won. But now it's time to give something back to my family and my wife, and I'm really hungry for more time with them."

He had four children and more than a dozen grandchildren. Daughter Katherine Bensen died in 2020.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar on Friday described Nolan as a "consummate outdoorsman, friend of labor, and he never forgot where he came from." He was the "comeback kid," she said, after being one of the youngest members of Congress to one of the oldest "freshmen" when he returned to politics.

Nolan had one more go after that, joining gubernatorial candidate and former Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson in the 2018 governor's race, with Nolan up for lieutenant governor. The duo finished third in the primary, falling to Gov. Tim Walz and Lt. Gov. Peggy Flanagan, who went on to win.

Sen. Grant Hauschild remembered Nolan for the way he made personal connections with the people he met. The former lawmaker had door-knocked with him in Hoyt Lakes, Minn., before Hauschild was elected.

"No one fought harder for the place they loved than him," Hauschild wrote on social media. "His eternal optimism was contagious and he always spent his capital on uplifting future leaders. Northern Minnesota will miss our champion as he joins the other political titans from our region in heaven."

John Wareham contributed to this story.
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