

**William Belanger** State legislator

# He worked across the aisle, helped build Bloomington

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Former legislator William “Bill” Belanger was an institution, both in and out of politics.

After two tours in Korea as a member of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, Belanger began a long career of public service in Bloomington, first through civic organizations, then on the City Council and finally in the Minnesota Senate.

“He was an American original,” said John Gibbs, a board member of the Three Rivers Park District and chairman of some of Belanger’s campaigns. “More than any given issue or battle, serving an organization was a big deal to him.”

Belanger, who spent 26 years as a Republican state senator for Bloomington and the surrounding area, died Friday at the Minnesota Veterans Home in Minneapolis after years of living with vascular dementia. He was 90.

“He would want to be remembered as a person who gave a lot,” said Lois Belanger, his wife of 65 years.

Belanger helped establish Normandale Community College and was involved in many projects that developed Bloomington, including the Mall of America.

“He was very proud of building Bloomington,” Gibbs said. “In many ways, he was really a founder.”

Though he softened when talking about his family, Belanger was a “friendly curmudgeon,” according to former Hennepin County Commissioner Randy Johnson, who represented the county’s south end on the board.

“He didn’t suffer fools gladly,” Johnson said. “But he’d still listen, say ‘I think you’re dead wrong’ and then ask about your kids.”

Belanger was born in Minneapolis and graduated from DeLaSalle High School and the then-College of St. Thomas. After returning from Korea, he got a job at Honeywell, where he and Lois met. The couple settled in Bloomington and raised seven children.

In the Legislature, Belanger built relationships with two DFL Tax Committee chairmen, former Sens. Doug Johnson and Larry Pogemiller. His interest in tax policy grew out of advice from his mentor, former state Sen. Jerome Blatz, who told him to keep his mouth shut and study up on taxes. He would serve on 12 conference committees held on tax bills.

“He was a data-driven engineer, but he knew more about Minnesota tax policy than any of the tax attorneys I worked with,” Johnson said.

And despite being a number cruncher, he cared deeply about people, Johnson said. “He really quietly worked with me behind the scenes on the welfare reform bills in the 1980s,” he said. “Bill was never a big show guy.”

Losing his final legislative campaign amid a DFL Party wave in 2006 came as a heartbreaking blow to Belanger, his wife said. But the disappointment was less about losing than saying goodbye to a role he loved.

“He definitely was a strong Republican, but he always worked across the aisle and he was always seeking out the opinions of Democrats,” Johnson said.

Belanger put it simply in a 2006 Star Tribune interview: “I was sent to represent the people of my district and get the job done. That means working with the other party.”

In retirement, Belanger became active in the Knights of Columbus and served four years as Grand Knight. He enjoyed fishing and reading at the family cabin in Birchwood, Wis. Those activities became more difficult over the last few years as dementia took hold, Lois said.

In addition to his wife, Belanger is survived by daughters Cheryl Rhoades of Bloomington; Mary Beth Saldin and Jennifer Buda, both of Aurora, Colo.; and Pamela Tupy of Apple Valley; sons William III of Bloomington; Richard of Park Falls, Wis.; and James of Eau Claire, Wis.; 17 grandchildren and 14 great-grandchildren.

The funeral mass will be at 11 a.m. Thursday at Nativity of Mary Catholic Church, 9900 Lyndale Av. S., Bloomington, with visitation an hour before the service.

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