

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2017

George Conzemius Legislator and agribusinessman

He helped shape wide range of policies, advocated for the poor

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George Conzemius was one of the most powerful legislators in the Minnesota Senate during the 1970s.

Much of the legislation he sponsored or guided helped to shape the state's stance on campaign finance limits, lobbyist registration, prison reform, property tax equalization, regulation of charities and the law permitting health maintenance organizations.

Conzemius died of natural causes Oct. 26 at an assisted-living center in Cannon Falls, Minn. He was 81.

When he was elected to the state Senate as a member of the liberal caucus at age 30 in 1966, he was Minnesota's youngest senator. "He always wanted to fight for the underdog," said his wife, Karen, of Cannon Falls.

Conzemius grew up on a farm in rural Cannon Falls. He graduated from Hastings High School and the University of Minnesota, where he played on the football team.

He traveled through Europe and the then-Soviet Union before returning home to teach agriculture, science and math at Cannon Falls High School throughout the 1960s. He also served in the U.S. Army and Air Force reserves.

Karen Conzemius said her husband was always interested in politics and wanted to make things better "for people who didn't have the same advantages as the rest of us."

He was in the state Senate from 1967 to 1976, representing Dakota, Goodhue and Wabasha counties, and served four years as majority whip for the DFL caucus.

Conzemius took on the issue of air pollution at the Pine Bend refinery, led a task force seeking more aid for Indians, and co-sponsored a bill creating the state ethics commission. He also helped secure funding for the Minnesota Zoo.

Even though Conzemius was a DFLer, he criticized Gov.

Wendell Anderson, a fellow DFLer, for appointing people who he believed ignored minority groups and the poor.

He left the Senate in January 1977, saying he wanted to return to private life.

A few weeks later, he was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of mail fraud and conspiracy for buying fertilizer at low prices, then reselling it at a profit during a fertilizer shortage. He served four months in prison.

During Conzemius' trial, then-Gov. Rudy Perpich testified on his behalf. "I have two brothers in the Minnesota Senate," Perpich said. "And on many, many occasions I have said publicly that the best senator, and the best legislator, was George Conzemius."

Conzemius told the Star Tribune in a 1987 interview that while he didn't miss politics, he still loved the issues. "I used to read 40 newspapers a day," he said. "I still read 20."

Conzemius was a lifelong farmer, growing sweet and field corn, peas and soybeans, his wife said. By age 40, he had built a multimillion-dollar agribusiness in the Cannon River Valley.

He served on many committees and was elected chairman of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Commission. In 1966 he was named "Goodhue County Citizen of the Year," and he was named to the list of "Minnesota's Ten Outstanding Young Men" by the Jaycees in 1972.

Conzemius enjoyed working in his garden and sharing what he grew. He avidly attended concerts and plays with friends, watched sporting events, traveled around the world and went to his grandchildren's programs.

Besides his wife, he is survived by daughters Marty Karsten, of Cortez, Colo.; Anne Anderson and Kaia Kristin Conzemius, both of Cannon Falls; and Sarah Conzemius of Huntington Beach, Calif.; sisters, Rosemary Sarri, of Ann Arbor, Mich.; Jane Donkers, of Red Wing; and Rita Nichols, of Oradell, N.J.; a brother, John, of Cannon Falls; and four grandchildren. Services were held Saturday at St. Ansgar's Lutheran Church in Cannon Falls.

"He always wanted to fight for the underdog."

— Wife Karen Conzemius