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Dennis Newinski was former state legislator

Star Tribune

February 13, 2009

The three-time congressional candidate and active church member touched people with his ability to connect, prompting them to ask him to run for office.

By Tim Harlow, Star Tribune

Former state legislator Dennis Newinski was a man who had strong beliefs, a positive outlook on life and a vision about what was important. He also had an inspiring personality, sincerity and common sense.

As a blue-collar worker, Newinski had no political aspirations, but many felt he would be the perfect candidate and asked the longtime union machinist to run for office, said his wife of 43 years, Sharie.

Newinski won a seat in the Minnesota House in 1990 and nearly made his way to Washington, D.C., in 1994 as a representative from the state's Fourth Congressional District. That year he nearly beat incumbent Bruce Vento in a district that had long been held by Democrats.

Newinski, who also ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Congress in 1996 and 1998, died Tuesday at his home in Maplewood after a two-year battle with mesothelioma, an asbestos-related cancer. He was 64.

"He was a curious mix of humbleness and confidence, a normal working guy who was appealing to the people," said his 1994 campaign manager and friend Gail Gisi. "When he talked to you, you were the most important thing in the world, and people thought, 'This is the kind of person I want to represent me in Washington.'"

'Mr. Positive all the time'

Newinski was respected for his ability to connect with the average person and for his dedication to his family, community, church and his machinist's job with Northern States Power, where he worked for 32 years.

In the past two years, as he faced his cancer diagnosis, Newinski was unwavering in his religious faith and spoke openly about his disease. He was invited to give the invocation at last year's State Republican Convention, said Republican Party Chairman Ron Carey.

"He was Mr. Positive all the time, and he used his last years to tell why he was at peace with the situation," Carey said.

In one of his last political appearances, Newinski was selected as an alternate delegate for last summer's National Republican Convention in St. Paul, said state RNC chairwoman Evie Axdahl of Maplewood.

Newinski was active at the Church of St. Peter in North St. Paul. There he taught classes for high school students, spoke during mass and served as a Boy Scout leader. He recently spoke at the North St. Paul mayor's prayer breakfast, Sharie said.

"He was a man of faith," she said. "He was our rock."

Newinski was given the Navigator Award as the Man of the Year in 2008 by the North St. Paul Knights of Columbus. He also loved acting and starred in several community theater productions. He also enjoyed playing golf, hunting and canoeing with his grandchildren, his wife said.

Newinski was born in 1944 in Minneapolis and graduated from De La Salle High School and Dunwoody Institute.

In addition to his wife, Newinski is survived by two sons, Greg of Sartell, Minn., and Mark of Cottage Grove; two daughters, Julie Keenan of Maplewood and Cindy Nybakke of Forest Lake; five brothers, Ed of Chanhassen, Tom of Burnsville, Roger of St. Louis Park, Bernie of Minneapolis and Vic of Maryland, and nine grandchildren.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. Monday at the Church of St. Peter, 2590 N. Margaret St., North St. Paul. Visitation will be held from 4 to 8 p.m. Sunday and one hour before services at the church.