

JIM RAMSTAD 1946-2020

From despair emerged a tireless advocate for mental health

The moderate Republican represented western Hennepin County in Congress for 18 years.

By ROCHELLE OLSON • rochelle.olson@startribune.com

Before he became the 18-year GOP congressman from Hennepin County's western suburbs, Jim Ramstad was a rookie state senator from Plymouth in a vomit-stained shirt locked in a South Dakota jail cell.

He didn't know what he'd done to get there and asked his jailer if he'd killed someone. He had been in a fight in a motel coffee shop after yet another long night of drinking.

That was July 31, 1981, the day he got sober and became a recovering alcoholic who would go on to champion landmark mental health and chemical addiction legislation through Congress. Ramstad died Thursday from Parkinson's disease, at 74. He was sober for 39 years.

As a state senator, Ramstad didn't have the option of an anonymity. "He decided at that point, 'I'm going to



RICHARD TSONG-TAATARI • Star Tribune file

Former Congressman Jim Ramstad, with his wife, Kathryn, in 2007, died on Thursday after a battle with Parkinson's disease.

be totally honest in this space and be who I am and let the chips fall where they may," his longtime congressional chief of staff Dean Peterson said.

Peterson said Ramstad's entire life, including his relationships and work in Congress, were shaped by the recovery principles of honesty, transparency, doing the right thing and courage. "He chose to embrace the recovery lifestyle and never shied away from that," Peterson said.

As a congressman, he dedicated himself to legislation and working across partisan lines. His work in recovery brought him into contact with famous performers, former presidents and desperate parents. The outpouring of tributes on social media since his death reflected the breadth of his impact.

Peterson said he'd seen it for years in the calls Ramstad took from anyone who reached out for help breaking out of chemical addiction. A mother in Tennessee, a drug user in Los Angeles. Ramstad always took the calls — usually on his own time.

See **RAMSTAD** on B4 ►

Legacy as an advocate

◀ **RAMSTAD** from B1

Ramstad will be most remembered for his work on access to treatment for mental health. He was chief sponsor of 2008 legislation that opened the door to treatment for millions of Americans suffering from mental illness or chemical addiction. At his behest, the legislation was named in honor of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, a Minnesota Democrat who was also passionate about mental health equity.

William C. Moyers, vice president for public affairs at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, said Ramstad turned his despair into a unique opportunity to become a national champion for recovery.

"Jim was one of those rare politicians who could lead with his heart and still use his head to score legislative points to get what he wanted," Moyers said. "The fight to end discrimination against people with addiction was long and the climb steep."

work across the aisle. "He was very much into the notion of 'I work for the people,'" she said.

Chip Tangen worked for Ramstad as legislative counsel in his early years in Congress when he was on the Judiciary Committee and Republicans were in the minority.

Tangen said Ramstad worked mightily with Democrats to get several of his bills into the massive 1994 Crime Bill, including the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children Act that requires convicted child molesters to register with the police after their release. The provision was inspired by the 1989 abduction of Jacob Wetterling in St. Joseph, a case that went unsolved for 27 years.

"He taught me not to be tribal, to work with the other side, to build a coalition," Tangen said.

Peterson said the two main rules in the office were: You responded to everyone and you sought to help everyone.

Mike Erlandson, the for-

istration of former President Barack Obama, though the appointment didn't end up happening. After he left Congress, he served as a fellow at Harvard University and was a senior adviser to Minnesota's Hazelden Treatment Center.

When Ramstad left Congress in early 2009, state Rep. Erik Paulsen replaced him in the district that includes southern and western Minneapolis suburbs. Paulsen, who got his start in politics with a staff job in Ramstad's D.C. office, said he last spoke to Ramstad two weeks ago. He was still living in Wayzata as he did for many years, Paulsen said, and was being cared for by his wife, Kathryn Ramstad.

"We didn't know it would happen this fast," Paulsen said of the man he called his friend and political mentor. "He was always very full of life, vibrant."

The Third District seat is now represented by a Democrat, U.S. Rep. Dean Phillips.

"He served with principle and grace for almost two

Megan Carr, a legislative aide who worked for Ramstad in Washington in the mid-'90s, recalled his dogged early work on the legislation with a meeting that included the actor Carol O'Connor, who played Archie Bunker on TV; former President Gerald Ford and his wife, Betty; and the singer Shawn Colvin. Carr said she would stand against the wall, her arms full of binders packed with research, so she could answer Ramstad's questions.

"He'd just say, 'this is why I'm doing this ... and let's work together,'" she said, adding that it wasn't just about a talking point, but that he wanted to get something done.

Now a vice president in health information systems at 3M, Carr said Ramstad's devotion to helping Minnesota's medical-technology industry helped set her career path. "He was the nicest boss. He treated staff like friends and friends like family," she said. "There'd always be one day a week where we'd all end up in his office chatting away."

He welcomed diversity of opinion both from his staff and when he was trying to pass legislation, she said, adding that she enjoyed watching him

mer head of the state DFL Party and longtime chief of staff to the late congressman Martin Sabo, knew Ramstad's work for years. "We lost another giant of Minnesota public policy," Erlandson said.

He described Ramstad as someone who was dedicated to the advancement of public policy over partisan politics who rolled up his sleeves and dug into the work. "His heart was bigger than the job," Erlandson said.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, a DFLer, called Ramstad a mentor on bipartisanship. "By being honest about his own personal struggle with alcoholism, Jim gave so many people courage to take on their own addictions," she said.

Ramstad, whose nickname among friends was "the Rammer," was a moderate Republican who wouldn't fit in with his party today. He supported legal abortion and sponsored climate change legislation. He also backed measures to increase auto fuel efficiency standards and sided with the Clinton administration's "roadless rule" to protect national forests, including those in northern Minnesota.

Ramstad was even considered for a post in the admin-

decades, and left a remarkable legacy in our community, our state, and our country," Phillips said in a tweet.

From a young age, Ramstad was a political junkie. Born in Jamestown, N.D., in 1946, he was a Boys Nation delegate to D.C. in 1963. Future President Bill Clinton was another delegate that year. In the famous photo of a young Clinton shaking hands with President John F. Kennedy, Ramstad, much taller than the other boys, is there in the background looking on.

Ramstad attended the University of Minnesota, earned a law degree from George Washington University and was an officer in the U.S. Army Reserve. He served in the state Senate for a decade before succeeding his mentor Bill Frenzel in Congress.

He is survived by his wife, but Ramstad was a bachelor for his entire career in Congress. Staff became family. "The workday would end and we'd go have dinner with him," Peterson said. "He always picked up the tab."

Staff writer Patrick Condon contributed to this report.
Rochelle Olson • 612-673-1747
@rochelleolson