

TOM RUKAVINA 1950 - 2019

He was colorful and tireless defender of the Iron Range

As a legislator and St. Louis County commissioner, he served with pride, humor.

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Tom Rukavina, a sometimes bombastic, stalwart defender of the Iron Range during a quarter-century in the Minnesota House, died Monday of complications from leukemia. He was 68.

"If he wasn't yelling at you, he didn't like you," said state Sen. David Tomassoni, D-Chisholm, who was a close friend. "He had passion for the little guy and was a giant in those kinds of fights."

Known for fiery speeches on the floor of the House, Rukavina stood just a few inches above 5 feet. He was a relentless champion of Iron Range priorities, first in the House and then as a St. Louis County commissioner until 2018. He served on the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board (IRRRB) for 26 years.

"I'm the political love child of Paul Wellstone and Jesse Ventura," he declared in 2012, referring to the late senator and the former governor with a strong independent streak.

But Rukavina was more than just a political showman; he knew in granular detail issues like taconite taxes and sulfate standards.

"It's a sad day for the Range," said state Rep. Rob Ecklund, D-International Falls. Ecklund recalled getting in an argument over a timber issue with Rukavina the first time they met, only for them to become the best of friends — a common Rukavina story.

By midday Monday, tributes for Rukavina poured forth from fellow Democrats.

"There'll never be another Tom Rukavina. He was smart, irreverent, and there was no one more authentic," said Ken Martin, DFL chairman.

Martin said every time they saw each other, Rukavina would check inside Martin's suit jacket to see if it was
See **RUKAVINA** on B2 ►



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"I'm the political love child of Paul Wellstone and Jesse Ventura," Tom Rukavina declared in 2012 to playfully describe his progressive politics and fiercely independent style.

Tom Rukavina dies; he was fierce advocate of Iron Range

► **RUKAVINA** from B1
union-made, and would give Martin a tongue lashing if it wasn't. Rukavina, who unsuccessfully ran for the DFL nomination for governor in 2010, pledged to convention delegates that even his underpants were union-made.

Rukavina also was a grim participant in a defining tragedy in Minnesota political history. Wellstone was flying to attend the funeral of Rukavina's father, Martin, when the plane crashed, killing Wellstone and seven others in October 2002.

"My dad spent his life fighting for the working class. He believed all work had value and that a housekeeper or a janitor has as much value to our society as a CEO," said Rukavina's daughter, Ida. "He was a kind and loving dad who taught us to stand up for something greater than ourselves."

Rukavina's daughter works for U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who said in a statement, "Minnesota and the Iron Range have lost a true champion for workers. Tom Rukavina understood the dignity of hard work, and was a force for Iron Range workers and their families."

Born in Virginia in 1950, Rukavina was a lifelong Ranger who worked as a milk and truck driver, legal assistant and miner. Despite

a cum laude political science degree from the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Rukavina preferred a plain-spoken and often salty style.

"They told me if he doesn't swear at you the first time he doesn't like you," Gov. Tim Walz said during a news conference on the day of his inauguration. "He did swear at me. There's folks who put their life into serving Minnesota, and Tom Rukavina was one of those."

Jeff Anderson, an Iron Range DFL operative who was most recently chief of staff to former U.S. Rep. Rick Nolan, said going door knocking with Rukavina was a master class in retail politics.

"We would go to senior high-rises in Virginia and Eveleth, and they knew him and he knew them, and to some of them he spoke Finnish and Slovenian," Anderson recalled.

Rukavina loved a good laugh, even at his own expense. During a debate about lowering the legal blood alcohol limit to 0.08, Rukavina said the new law would be unfair to Rangers because they wake up at 0.08.

He is survived by wife Jean, daughter Ida and son Victor. Details about funeral arrangements were not yet available.

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