

Wayne Simoneau Legislator and honored leader

State finance commissioner was 'splendid public servant'

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Wayne A. Simoneau made it his life's work to serve the people of Minnesota and was humbled by the honor of doing so, his friends, family and colleagues said.

He served in the Legislature for 20 years, rising to chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. He served as commissioner of finance, the No. 2 stop in the executive branch of state government, under Gov. Arne Carlson, and as assistant commissioner and commissioner of the Department of Employee Relations under Carlson and Gov. Jesse Ventura.

Simoneau, 82, died of complications from lung disease May 21 at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis.

"Wayne was a splendid public servant," said Carlson, who gave the eulogy at Simoneau's funeral Friday. "He had this incredible gratitude, for being able to live in this country and for the sacrifices others made. ... It was never about advancement, it was never about 'me,' it was always about others."

Simoneau was born and raised in Washburn, Wis., and moved to Minneapolis at age 18 to learn auto mechanics at Dunwoody Institute. He worked in the garage at the old Swanberg & Scheefe Buick dealership in Minneapolis for much of his early life and was a Teamsters Union steward, a position that influenced his tenure in the Legislature.

Before his time in the Legislature, Simoneau liked to dabble in DFL politics, his family said. Daughters Leslie Simoneau and Laura Sengil said door-knocking and handing out campaign literature was a family affair.

When the House seat that included his Fridley neighborhood became vacant in 1974, Simoneau was DFL Senate District chairman. He won that election and 10 more afterward.

He quickly became a House authority on collective bargaining, pay equity, workers' compensation and public employee pensions. In 1995, Carlson, a Republican, made Simoneau assistant commissioner of employee relations. A year later, he became finance commissioner.

Carlson told story after story about Simoneau's ability to get along with people, whether it was with colleagues,



Star Tribune photo

Then-state Rep. Wayne Simoneau took the House floor in April 1982.

labor activists, the high and mighty on Wall Street or just common folk.

The former governor said Simoneau helped settle a Metro Transit strike by gathering everyone at the governor's residence and working through the night.

In 1997, when a prime goal of Carlson's administration was to restore Minnesota's Triple A bond rating, Simoneau went to Wall Street to talk to the big shots at Standard & Poor's. "He was a car mechanic, but he wasn't in the least bit intimidated by Wall Street," Carlson said. "He was just as at home as the other side of the table."

Simoneau was a leading force in reforming Minnesota's workers' comp system and its state employee pensions.

"We had to reform workers' compensation that first year," Carlson said, referring to his first year as governor in 1991. "He was a labor Democrat and he stepped up and said, 'I'm with you.' To work arm in arm with a Republican governor took a lot of guts."

Simoneau also was a champion of equal pay for female public employees and was considered "the patron saint" for women who wanted to get into politics.

It was the same at home with his six children, three boys and three girls, his daughters said. The boys worked alongside the girls in the kitchen; the girls worked alongside the boys on the cars.

By 1998, Simoneau knew it was time to retire and putter in his beloved gardens. Still, he stayed on two more years, as acting commissioner of employee relations under Ventura.

"He kept his sense of humor until the end," daughter Laura said. He also stayed active until the end, serving on committees and as counsel for former colleagues and new legislators.

He missed his flowers after selling his Fridley home and "did some gardening on the QT" after moving to a townhouse in Blaine, his daughter said. He loved spending time with his grandchildren.

Besides his daughters, he is survived by his wife of 58 years, Jane; sons Tony, Paul and Matt; another daughter, Lisa Simoneau; nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Services have been held.