

short takes

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REMEMBERING STEVE SMITH Legislator was a champion for kids

A few weeks before the 2011 legislative session, I was part of a small group of advocates who walked into state Rep. Steve Smith's office to ask for his help with a critically important task: ending child sex trafficking in Minnesota. Though it was only a few years ago, it was a very different political landscape, with the Republicans having just seized control of both houses and the DFL Party having taken back the governor's office for the first time since Rudy Perpich.

As legislative advocates, all of our carefully drawn plans to make Minnesota the fifth state in the nation to pass a Safe Harbor law to protect sexually exploited children quickly went out the window with the appointment of all new caucus leaders and committee chairs. More than a bit panicked and with little time to regroup, we hastily set up our meeting with Steve, a Republican from Mound and the incoming Judiciary Policy and Finance Committee chairman.

After listening intently for several minutes and before we even had a chance to ask, Steve offered to author the Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Youth Act. In a follow-up conversation several days later, he told me that he wasn't just interested in being listed as an author, but that he wanted to be a true champion for sexually exploited

kids in Minnesota. It wasn't until I invited him to speak at a news conference announcing the legislation that I learned that Steve's definition of "champion" was vastly different from the majority of his colleagues. Seemingly bemused by my assurances that the media would all be there and that we wanted him to be front and center, Steve put a hand on my shoulder and replied with a wry smile, "The cameras are for someone else. I'd rather just put my head down and get this done." With that, he turned and walked away.

Over the course of the grueling 2011 legislative session, complete with budget shutdowns and employee furloughs, I had the privilege of working alongside Steve as he quietly and tenaciously made good on his commitment to protect Minnesota's children from sexual exploitation. When, on July 20 of that year, the Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Youth Act was finally signed into law, I know he was tremendously proud, although he, of course, would never say so publicly.

That was Steve Smith, who died this week at age 64. A humble statesman, a mentor, a friend and a champion for Minnesota's kids who will be sorely missed.

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