



David Dill is remembered for a relentless work ethic during his 13 years in the state House. (File photo)

Colleagues remember David Dill as House's 'quiet giant'

By: Mike Mullen August 12, 2015 0

There were all kinds of ways to meet David Dill.

Tom Bakk first came to know Dill in the 1980s, back when the most the two had in common was a love for fishing and a good snowmobile trek. Former Iron Range legislator Tom Rukavina met Dill during the next decade, when a fire had destroyed much of the main street in the city of Orr. Dill had become city administrator in that small northeastern outpost, and Rukavina, a committed pro-labor stalwart, had been warned about "this Republican from Indiana."



Tom Rukavina



Tom Bakk

Rep. Denny McNamara, R-Hastings, didn't realize he'd sat in a line of DFL members on his first day in committee in 2003, but was told he could keep the seat he'd randomly chosen, which happened to be next to Dill, if he wanted. McNamara stayed, and the two struck up a friendship that lasted a dozen years. Rep. Paul Thissen, DFL-Minneapolis, spent years with a seat on the House floor just behind Dill, who was positioned up front, just beneath the House Speaker's rostrum. The seat location meant Dill had to turn and address the entire body with comments or a speech, and when he did, most remember that a hush often fell over the otherwise noisy chamber.

Regardless of the terms when legislators first met Dill, the entrepreneur and avid sportsman managed to ingratiate himself with a variety of political figures from different regions, ideologies and backgrounds. Some were still reeling this week at the news that Dill, 60, died this past weekend after an aggressive form of cancer was discovered just weeks earlier.

Dill is remembered for a relentless work ethic during his 13 years in the state House. Dill's turn in office followed a remarkable early run of success in his professional career. A business-savvy commercial pilot, Dill started an air freight company right out of college and employed some 400 people by the time he sold the business to Federal

Express at the age of 27. He relocated from his native Indiana to northern Minnesota, where his family had summered when he was a boy, and soon started a second act in public service, spending more than a decade as a city official in Orr before his election to seven terms in the House.

"People run and serve for a lot of reasons," Bakk said. "David's was the best. He just really, deeply, cared about his community."

That commitment was demonstrated through Dill's approach to constituent services, where Bakk and Dill often heard jointly from their shared electorate; the Senate leader said Dill nearly always "beat me to the punch" in reacting first to a citizen's call. It continued up through late last month, when Bakk visited Dill during his treatment in the Mayo Clinic, and found his friend, then on his deathbed, still fretting about the failure to pass a tax bill that would have helped Cook County.

Those affected by Dill's passing include Rep. Tom Anzelc, DFL-Balsam Township, who counted the pilot and resort owner as his "closest confidante" in the Legislature. Their friendship grew despite an initial wariness from Anzelc, an Iron Range labor organizer, about Dill, who had started his legislative career viewing things from a corporate perspective.

Anzelc, leader of the Iron Range legislative delegation, eventually came to bookend his session day by talking to Dill. In the mornings, they greeted each other and discussed that day's agenda, and at night they "debriefed" over what had transpired. Over the last several years, Dill suffered from a litany of physical ailments. He was diabetic, and required gastric bypass surgery before he could safely receive a kidney transplant, among other health issues. Even still, Anzelc recalls how Dill had reached out to him during his own treatment for prostate cancer in 2013.

"One of Dave's strengths as a person was he was not a complainer," Anzelc said. "He didn't complain about his health, and he certainly could have ... but he'd be more interested in my health, in how my issue was going, than he was to talk about his own."

The common touch and personal warmth several lawmakers spoke of sustained Dill through numerous political battles. Starting in 2002, Dill won election to his first three terms despite losing the DFL endorsement in his district; in later years, his popularity was such that local Republicans sometimes did not field an opponent.

Dill also engaged in some of the trickiest policy issues at the Capitol, often taking stances unpopular within his own caucus. He was a champion of forestry and mining interests, supporting copper-nickel prospects in his own district and, more recently, fighting heavy environmental regulations on frac sand mining in another corner of the state. Dill was also chief author on a controversial bill that legalized wolf hunting, siding with aggrieved rural farmers over some of his urban DFL colleagues. On social issues, Dill was one of a small group of House Democrats who opposed abortion.

Throughout it all, Dill maintained strong relationships within the caucus. Thissen, who led the DFL House majority in 2013-14, said members respected Dill's thoughtfulness and temperament, even when they disagreed with his votes.

"He had this presence about him, where it was clear he felt incredibly comfortable in his own skin, and what he believed," Thissen said.

Thissen and Rukavina recalled numerous instances where Dill, in a private caucus meeting, voiced his support for tax increases that would cut into the incomes of wealthy Minnesotans like himself. In speeches in small rooms, and on the House floor, Dill reasoned that people with money could afford to be taxed to help support people, regions and industries that were falling behind.

"In that short time, a decade and a few years, [Dill] came a long way in his thinking," Rukavina said. "He cared about those who were at the bottom of the economic ladder."

Dill got a taste for legislative action in the late 1990s, when he worked with Bakk, then his representative, on a number of issues for tourism and outdoors where the northland borders Canada. His legislative career essentially started in Bakk's office one day, when Dill observed that he might run for the House if Bakk ever ran to replace Senate fixture Doug Johnson. That happened in 2002, and Dill survived a crowded primary to win Bakk's former seat.

By the time Anzelc joined the House in 2007, he noticed that lawmakers already afforded Dill a respect that few others enjoyed.

"When David Dill got up to speak in the House — and you know how raucous, and how loud it can get on the floor — the whole place quieted down, and people listened," Anzelc recalled.

Democratic legislator Al Juhnke distributed a picture of Dill speaking from his familiar front-row spot earlier this week. Rukavina liked the photo, and the memory, so much he immediately forwarded it to his wife, asking her to print the image and stick it on the face of their refrigerator.

In the most recent redistricting, Dill lost parts of his former constituency to Anzelc and Rep. Mary Murphy, DFL-Hermantown, the longest-tenured current Iron Range member. Murphy said she and Dill collaborated often on local needs, and she was always interested in how her legislative neighbor was thinking about new debates.

"He loved to speculate about 'what ifs', and how to get to a place in legislation that might be a different path than most people would take on an issue," Murphy said.

McNamara traded the gavel with Dill as the respective caucus leaders on House environment committees, and recalled that Dill was the "go-to person" on issues, for members on both sides of the aisle.

"What he had was a wealth of knowledge," McNamara said. "He was real quiet. But he was a quiet giant."

Dill's friendships with members often extended outside the Capitol, as he invited many to hunt on his land or fish at the resort he and his son, Drake, operated in Ontario, Canada. Anzelc laments that he could never make the timing work until this year, and had scheduled his trip for the coming weekend, when Dill's funeral service will be held in International Falls. Anzelc still plans to take the trip in memory of Dill, explaining that he has "a suspicion that my friend Dave would be happy to know we're following through."

McNamara and Rep. Dan Fabian, R-Roseau, also took Dill up on those invitations. Fostering close relationships with members from both parties served Dill, as well as his district, allowing him to secure even small victories when his party was in the minority. Bakk observed that the 2011 bonding bill, part of a deal that helped end a state government shutdown, consisted almost entirely of general spending categories, with just a single earmark: a \$1.3 appropriation for a campground in Burlington Bay, which Dill had clinched despite a difficult negotiating climate.

A ribbon-cutting for that project was held last month. By that time, Dill had already been admitted to Mayo Clinic for treatment of a cancerous tumor. It soon spread to other parts of his body, and Dill's condition deteriorated rapidly. Bakk knew things had worsened, and so he was "shocked" at Dill's energy and good spirits when he visited the hospital room in late July.

The two talked fishing and hunting, as they always did. (Dill had continued working at his Canadian resort until he was overwhelmed by his illness, a then-undiagnosed pain in his stomach.) When Dill eventually said that he was growing tired, Bakk and others in his group went to leave, but Dill called him back in. He thanked Bakk for "making his life easy," and for being a good friend. Bakk urged Dill to keep fighting, leading Dill to joke that he might need help getting his all-terrain vehicle (ATV) started to leave the clinic in Rochester.

It turned out to be one of Dill's last good days before his death on Saturday evening.

For all his many health problems experienced during his time in office, Bakk said Dill never let his own issues interfere with his work on behalf of the district.

"I had immense respect for David," Bakk said. "He was one of the hardest working, if not the hardest working House member. Frankly, I wish we had more people like him in the Legislature."

Like Anzelc, Bakk and McNamara had tentative plans to make family trips to Dill's home away from home in Ontario, though all three said they fear it will be different, and less fun, without their friend.

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