

LOCAL

Patrick Welch, 22-year state senator, dead at 71

By Tom Collins

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*NewsTribune file photo/Kemp Smith*

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Former state Sen. Patrick Welch, who represented most of La Salle and Bureau counties for 22 years, died Tuesday from complications of a stroke. The longtime Peru Democrat had recently turned 71.

“Pat lived his life exactly as he wanted to,” friend Jan Czarnik posted on Welch’s Facebook page. “He accomplished a great deal, did so much good, and unquestionably leaves this world a better place than he found it.”

Chicago-born Welch earned a law degree from the Illinois Institute of Technology/Kent College of Law but used his legal skills primarily in the statehouse, where he represented the 38th Senate District from 1982-2004. He first unseated Republican Betty Hoxsey in what was intended to be a GOP-friendly district and was reelected six times.

“Pat Welch was one of the best representatives this area has ever had,” recalled Rocky Raikes, former Democratic Party chairman for La Salle County. “He brought in jobs, helped pay to build schools, you name it. It didn’t matter if it was a firehouse, a sewage treatment plant or food for the hungry, he was always there doing a great job for the people of this district.”

THE Times

atched on to RFK's civil rights agenda and thoroughly enjoyed life on the campaign trail.

"That did it for me," Welch recalled in a 2002 interview. "After that I was committed to going into politics."

Kennedy's subsequent assassination didn't cool his ardor for politics. Within months of earning his law degree he was named Democratic State Central Committeeman in 1978. Welch, not yet 30, was the youngest to hold that office at that time.

He was 33 years old when he trudged through snow to campaign against Hoxsey in 1982, attributing his upset win to the "sympathy vote" he got from homeowners who marveled at him stumping in the bitter cold.

Welch's Senate colleagues derided him as a "one-term wonder," but he proved them wrong. Former La Salle County coroner Jody Bernard remembered Welch as intelligent, knowledgeable and sharp with a "phenomenal" grasp of state government.

"Personally, I was always so appreciative of how he welcomed newcomers such as myself in 1996," Bernard

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“He was a longtime and respected leader of the Democratic Party at both the state and local level,” Mautino said. “The Illinois Valley benefited greatly from his leadership, and his ability to provide for the needs of his district. The people of the state of Illinois are better for his service. He was a friend to all the Democrats and I will miss him.”

Welch may have been popular, but he would later attribute his swift ouster to abortion. He had reversed his personal stance to pro-abortion and this won him the enmity of churches and religious groups, making him vulnerable to a fresh-faced challenger.

That challenge arrived when then-political newcomer Gary Dahl ran as a Republican in 2004 and beat Welch with 51.4% of the vote — and after a campaign that cost both sides more than \$2 million, by Welch’s estimate at the time.

Welch remained in state government, accepting a 2005 post as assistant director of the Illinois Department of Revenue. Welch retired from Revenue and, in 2011, from practicing law; but his final years were pockmarked by tragedy. His only son Daniel died suddenly at age 25 in 2007 and Welch’s former wife Bonnie succumbed to cancer four years later.

Welch personally was afflicted with dementia, a fact revealed last fall when a missing-person alert was issued for him by Orland Park police. He was located safe in Chicago.

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Tom Collins can be reached at (815) 220-6930 or TCollins@shawmedia.com. Follow him on Twitter @NT_Court.

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