Ted Kennedy led the way, inspiring others to lead

BY PROF. MARK C. ALEXANDER

I remember a conversation from one day in the first weeks during which I worked for Sen. Ted Kennedy in 1988. I was just 23, and he had offered me the opportunity to serve as policy director on his re-election campaign. I had been working on Capitol Hill for a couple of years following graduation from college, and I was full of youthful wide-eyed idealism.

I had been working on health care reform. I went to Sen. Kennedy and vented about the disgrace I saw, that is, the 25 million Americans who were without health insurance at that time. I told him I couldn’t understand how we could be in this situation and that I thought we had to push hard our message of health care reform.

With that little rant behind me, I waited for the senator’s reaction. “What do you think I’ve been working on for the last 25 years?” he replied, as a warm and friendly smile spread across his face. He spent his career pushing to improve access to health care for all Americans — it was the cause of his life. He was driven by a desire to help, to serve others. Everyday Americans. That was his motivation. And it has driven me, as well.

For decades, he pushed the causes that mattered to him fearlessly and tirelessly. That year, we ran a full-page ad in the newspapers in the days leading up to Election Day. The banner headline on the ad read: “He Dares to Lead.” And that is what he did, on health care; on education, the key to opportunity; on civil rights and matters of equality. Ted Kennedy dared to lead. And he did so in order to help people.

Sen. Kennedy dared to lead, in order to empower all Americans, via far-reaching legislation, and he also wanted to empower people individually, as a role model, mentor and friend.

He is legendary for taking on the father role for his nieces and nephews who had lost their parents. He also played that role for his staffers, treating us like family. He wanted to make sure we all had the chance to grow and carry on the work of those who preceded us and gave us opportunities. Former staffers include leaders of business, government and academia, including Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, the late Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and current White House Counsel Greg Craig. I am a proud member of that family, and we are all — each in our own way — committed to carrying on the legacy that he leaves behind. Each individual brings something unique, and the common commitment from all of us is to try to make a difference and to lead.

The last day I spent time with Ted Kennedy was Feb. 4, 2008, the day before “Super Tuesday” in the Democratic Party presidential primary season. Sen. Kennedy had
endorsed Barack Obama just a few days earlier. He was passing the torch to a new
generation. I had served then-Sen. Obama since the beginning of the campaign as policy
director and senior advisor, and I had come home to run events in New Jersey during the
primaries. We had a big rally in the Izod Center in the Meadowlands, with Sen. Kennedy
delivering the big speech before Obama himself spoke.

As the big show was about to begin, Sen. Kennedy and I waited in the underbelly of the
Izod Center. Curtained off from the main arena stage area, it was there we caught up, out
of sight of the general public. It can be oddly quiet and peaceful there. Moments of
stillness and intimacy graced us in stark contrast to the commotion and public nature of
the arena. We managed to squeeze in a fair amount of conversation, from how my friend
Teddy Jr., and his family were doing, to our days working together in 1988. He told me
of his excitement to be in a position to be helping Obama, and he was glad that I had
committed to the campaign from the start. I always had seen the connection between
Kennedy and Obama — it was personal to me. His endorsement was validation of what I
saw as the natural line of politics over the last 50 years, from JFK and Bobby Kennedy,
carried through Ted Kennedy. We had a few minutes suspended in the quiet that is
unique in a massive arena with thousands of people in attendance. Standing beside the
curtain that marked our barrier to the lights and the noise, I again felt that momentary
calm and joy of having some time with my old boss, my hero, my mentor.

In that moment on that day, I saw a range of my own life experiences, inspired and
nourished by Ted Kennedy along the way. None can fill his shoes, but the thousands of
us who have passed through his life, and the millions touched by his commitment will
live out our lives trying to make a difference. I am lucky to have worked for him.

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