

Stewart B. McKinney: The Man

By Carol Lundin

In 1987 President Ronald Reagan signed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, authorizing federal funds all for emergency food and shelter programs. Revised in 1990 and again in 1994, the Act now ensures that homeless children have access to an appropriate education; but who was Stewart B. McKinney?

Stewart Brett McKinney was born of wealth in 1931 in Pittsburgh, but raised in Connecticut. His educational background included Princeton University and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Yale University. He also served in the U.S. Air Force from 1951 to 1955. McKinney was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1970. He represented his home state of Connecticut in Congress for nine terms.

Although he was the wealthiest congressmen during his terms in office, McKinney was regarded by his peers as a fighter for the causes of the forgotten. An independent-minded, liberal republican, McKinney worked tirelessly for urban aid and social welfare programs. He supported the availability of low- and moderate-income housing. In the 97th Congress, he spearheaded the passage of the Amerasian Immigration Act, which gave children of military servicemen in Asia the right to obtain visas. However, McKinney was most outspoken of the plight of the homeless – especially those with mental illness, left on the street.

Stewart B. McKinney was a heavy smoker and plagued with heart disease. He died at the age of 56 on May 7, 1987 from pneumonia brought on by acquired immune deficiency syndrome. In his eulogy Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr. (R-Conn.) said of McKinney, “From alleviating wretchedness in housing...to loving the unwanted children of Americans in Vietnam, this was a working patriot...”

Bruce F. Vento

By Joyce Austin

The Vento in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, refers to Bruce F. Vento; but who, you may ask, was Bruce F. Vento?

Bruce F. Vento was born October 7, 1940 in St. Paul, Minnesota. The second of eight children, Bruce took great pride in calling himself a lifelong resident of St. Paul's East Side. He was educated at Thomas College, Wisconsin State University, and the University of Minnesota.

Elected to the Minnesota State Legislature in 1970, Vento served three consecutive terms. In 1977, he was elected by the Fourth District for the state of Minnesota to the U.S. House of Representatives. Committed to improving the welfare of his fellow men and protecting natural resources and the environment, his work on behalf of the environment earned him the 1994 Ansel Adams Conservation Award from the Wilderness Society, honors from the Sierra Club, and the National Parks Conservation Association's Conservationist of the Year Award for 1987.

In June of 2000, Vento received special recognition from President Clinton for his years of work on behalf of America's homeless population. Bruce F. Vento worked alongside Stewart B. McKinney and was co-author of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, which created federal funding for support services, transitional housing, and emergency shelter grants for the nation's homeless. He was an honored member of the National Alliance to End Homelessness and earned a host of awards for his leadership and legislative contributions to improving the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness.

After being diagnosed with lung cancer, brought on by asbestos exposure during his early work as a laborer, Congressman Vento decided not to seek another term. In a released statement, he stressed that many of the best ideas were the “can do attitudes... and the expectations that the government and I could make a difference in the quality of life.” He further quoted Hubert Humphrey in his closing statements: “The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped.” Congressman Vento died at his home on October 10, 2000, three days after his 60th birthday.