

A selection of voices from the community, nation and world

The guy who said 'public service' as if he really meant it

Dawn has barely broken, and Paul Wellstone is already directing traffic. Pacing in front of his Washington brownstone, he waves his arms wildly.

"Park over there — behind that Honda," he calls out. "Get over here."

"You gotta see this house," he says, dragging you by the elbow. "It's incredible. You won't believe it. Really."

And so just minutes after 7 on a May morning you're traipsing through a senator's kitchen, surveying his library, examining family photos in the small bedroom. You peer into the back garden — "The landlords are *terrific*. They let us use it any time we want" — as Sheila appears in a t-shirt and jeans.

She smiles, almost apologetically. "He's always showing this place off," she says. "Sweetheart, you'll be late."

The senator shrugs and dashes into a side hallway. "Look!" he says. "The workout room!"

It's all lovely, but somehow not what you expected. It's a small, cluttered place — packed with books and papers and art and ideas. Charming, indeed, but not elegant. Professorial, yes, but hardly senatorial.

And then you remember: This isn't the home of just any senator. It's the home of the odd one from Minnesota. The man who came to town not



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knowing how to dress. The radical who worries less about splash than substance, who cares less about things than people. The one who loves politics not so much as a game — though he's plainly a player — but as a world-healing venture. The guy who actually seems to *mean* it when he talks about "public service."

Measuring a life

It sounds sappy to say all this — especially after a plane has gone down. Fresh loss can evoke extravagant utterance. But lives are made up of small deeds and great moments that linger past the last breath. Just as a home speaks of its occupant, a human being's days define his character. It's only right to remember.

And on this May day, the eccentric senator from Minnesota hops into a car and picks up a cell phone. Call No. 1: a birthday greeting to a granddaughter turning 10. The two chat for 15 minutes, and only after plans are made for a weekend hence does Wellstone start talking about the bevy of bills he's fussing over.

He talks about the mental-health parity bill he's pushing with Sen. Pete Domenici. He talks about his coming contest against Norm Coleman: "I'll win it," he says. "I definitely will."

He mentions his worry that Republican detractors will exploit his newly diagnosed multiple sclerosis for political gain. He talks about the mistake the White House is making in curbing civil liberties to fight terrorism. He talks. And talks.

Almost Humphrey

He's still talking when the car pulls up at a Bethesda hotel, where he's picking up an award for his leadership on mental-health issues. He even half-apologizes for it:

"You want to hear my favorite story about being in the Senate?" he asks the mental-health crowd.

"It involves Fritz Hollings of South Carolina. I'd just given one of my first speeches during a floor de-

bate. I really was nervous, but I marshalled evidence for my point of view, spoke with passion, and I felt pretty good about it.

"I sat down and Hollings came up to me. 'Young man,' he said, 'you remind me of Hubert Humphrey.' Of course, if you're from Minnesota, that's pretty hot stuff.

"Then Hollings went on: 'You talk too much.'"

"I can't help it," Wellstone says later. "I have too much to say. There's too much to do."

With a conscience

He *was* a talker. But even more, he was a doer. All about town, stunned people are saying the same thing:

"He was a man of principle."

That he was. The short, loping liberal from Carleton College did what many onlookers said could not be done: He spoke his mind and won two elections — quite nearly three, but for fate. He went to Washington with little more than a rumpled wardrobe and a conscience — and made a mark. He gave principle a good name.

Dreaming democracy

May is past. November looms. Imagining a world without Wellstone — without the three lost Well-

stones — seems as yet impossible.

But even when the absence is fully felt and accepted, the words he spoke in May will still ring true:

"Do you know what changes things? The really important thing is the citizenry. That's what always does it: *People*. People who have the moral courage to tell the stories of their own lives — to say, for instance, 'We just *refuse* to let you treat us or our brothers or our sisters or our children or our parents or our friends as if we are people of lesser dignity or worth.'

"That's what will do it. That's democracy."

Striving, serving

He was a man of principle.

He said what he thought. He did what he felt he must. He strived to heal the world — with firebrand speeches, with tiny bill riders, with ambitious bills, with strategic compromise, with bold and lonely stands, with grand visions that sometimes became the law of the land.

If not for a plane that fell from the sky, he would be striving and serving still. Who does not grieve?

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