

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Remembering ADA Hero Bobby Silverstein

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John Sununu, the father of the current governor of New Hampshire, was George H. W. Bush's Chief of Staff when the Americans with Disabilities Act worked its way through Congress. Bobby Silverstein, primary Senate sponsor Tom Harkin's point man on the ADA, accompanied Harkin and Sen. Ted Kennedy to a White House meeting, at which Sununu objected to some of the ADA's provisions because he felt they were hard on business.

Bills don't just work their way through Congress by themselves. The drafting and garnering of support for legislation is done by staff, most of whom are brilliant and ideologically and intellectually committed to making the world a better place.

Bobby, who passed away recently, was the Senate architect and engineer of the ADA. He had the audacity, after referring to one of dozens of notebooks he had wheeled to the White House on a cart, to rebut Sununu.

Sununu yelled in Bobby's face and Kennedy yelled back. According to Sen. Harkin, he said something like, "You want to yell? Yell at me. Leave the staff out of it. Fight with the big boys." Bobby prevailed.

I met Bobby when the ADA was being drafted. I was there to help craft the ADA accessible transportation requirements, having successfully sued MTA in New York City and SEPTA in Philadelphia. The oldest, largest rail cities in the U.S. had agreed to retrofit at least "key" stations, make all new buses accessible, and provide paratransit with meaningful service criteria.

That first day, Bobby and I realized we'd met before. I went to Herricks High School, he went to Wheatley High School, and we had played soccer against each other. Bobby was the co-captain of his team. The other captain was Shep Messing, who went on to be the U.S. Olympic goalie in the '72 Munich Olympics. My friends tell me we won. I can't really remember – although I was riding the bench, anyway.

Robert "but always Bobby, even professionally" Silverstein spent his adult life in Washington, D.C. and was probably America's foremost expert on the interface of law with disability.

He shepherded dozens of bills benefitting people with disabilities through Congress, then left to analyze and create disability policy at George Washington University and for the past fifteen years, was a partner with the firm of Powers Pyles Sutter and Verville – the same firm at which Viscardi Center's former CEO, John Kemp, was a partner.

Bobby was smart, funny, strategic and compassionate. I am sure his passing has left an enormous void for his wife, children and grandchildren. I know that he is irreplaceable. His contribution to the history of disability rights is quietly legion.

Long Islanders should be proud of just how many lions of advocacy for people with disabilities grew up here, and developed moral clarity and a sense of justice.