Reflections on Congressman Lou Stokes

I have many fond memories of Congressman Lou Stokes. For the past two decades, I was fortunate to know this political and social policy legend – this open, honest, and unassuming gentleman.

One fond recent memory involved meeting Mr. Stokes and Dr. Lou Sullivan on Capitol Hill, in the Cannon House Office Building, in April of this year. The event was the 30th anniversary of the “Heckler Report” – the Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Black and Minority Health. It was an opportunity, for all of us who work to make our country a healthier nation, to thank the luminaries who began this process. We heard from health policy experts such as Ambassador Margaret Heckler, Dr. Louis W. Sullivan, and Dr. David Satcher. And, of course, Congressman Lou Stokes.

That day, I heard him recount how an organization which Dr. Sullivan, Dr. Satcher and I were fortunate to lead, the Association of Minority Health Professions Schools (AMHPS), was an important partner in advising him about health policy. I was pleased that this giant of a man, someone whom I had admired for years, considered our efforts to have been an important contributor to some of his most important accomplishments.

The Congressman spoke extemporaneously. He was crisp, clear, and to the point. And he was quick to share the credit, often more generously than one deserved, a hallmark of his character. Afterwards, I was fortunate to be in a picture with two of my heroes: Dr. Sullivan and Rep. Stokes.

The event ended with many of the speakers leaving at the same time. I walked Dr. Sullivan outside to his awaiting car. Almost immediately, a second limousine pulled up behind Dr. Sullivan’s car. Bouncing out of the Cannon Building was Lou Stokes who proceeded down the steps and into his awaiting car. Again, I was lucky to get a picture with “the Lous”, which I captioned “How to arrive and leave an event in style!”

I, like many, will miss Congressman Stokes. I will miss the way he made things happen; his dependability, which he carried with such ease; his steady hand and easy smile; a friend who always had a listening ear; his joyful and easy laugh; a Washington colleague who never forgot why he came to this city – to help Clevelanders, all Americans, and the world. A man who successfully and effectively cut across party, racial, and geographic lines.

I will miss the trailblazer, the leader, the giant. The gentleman.

Beginning this Wednesday, the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) will convene its Annual Legislative Conference (ALC). And this week, we will all remember one of the founders of the CBC, Congressman Lou Stokes.

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