

## Rep. Crowley, education reformer, dies

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### Journal Staff Reports

NEWPORT - Rep. Paul W. Crowley, a Newport restaurateur who, in nearly three decades in the General Assembly, championed schoolchildren and the city where he was raised, died yesterday morning at home after a protracted fight with melanoma. He was 57.

Having served 27 consecutive years in the House of Representatives, Crowley was the longest presiding Democrat in the General Assembly and its second most veteran member.

His lengthy tenure enabled him to become the point man on education issues as the State House took on an increasingly active role in financing - and shaping - the state's public schools. In the 1980s and 1990s, years before it was popular, Crowley led efforts to make public schools more accountable for student and teacher progress through innovations such as charter schools and increased aid to poorer districts.

"What a giant", said Education Commissioner Peter J. McWalters. "He was a warrior for kids and a warrior for justice and a warrior for fairness".

"Paul Crowley was all that is good with Rhode Island politics," said William J. Murphy, speaker of the House. "He placed great importance in the way the institution of the General Assembly was run. He was a representative I greatly admired because he stood by his convictions."

Governor Carcieri yesterday ordered flags flown at half-staff to honor Crowley and authorized the use of Colony House, in Newport, for the legislator's wake tomorrow from 3 to 8 p.m. Crowley had requested that he be allowed to lie in state in the 264-year-old building, which served as Rhode Island's State House for many years.

A burly man with a thick mane of white hair, Crowley was one of those rare Newport figures who successfully straddled the cultures of the city's blueblood socialites and the everyday folks he represented from the Irish-American Fifth Ward neighborhood. He was equally at ease at Bellevue Avenue mansion fundraisers and singing Irish ballads late into the evening with neighbors and political friends at La Forge Casino Restaurant, one of the two Newport restaurants his family had an interest in. (The other was the now-closed Christie's on Thames Street.)

"I can see him with a glass in his hand, a smile on his face and a song on his lips," said Matthew J. Smith, the former Rhode Island House speaker. "He was really a very warm guy, a family man, someone who lived his life well."

Crowley first sought elective office when he ran for Newport City Council in 1977. He lost that year and again in a second try two years later. But in 1981, Crowley, then 31, ran in a special election for a vacant state representative seat against Eileen Slocum, a wealthy Republican leader and Bellevue Avenue doyenne. He beat her that year and in a rematch the following year. He never lost another election.

One of his first legislative efforts was to establish the Newport County Convention and Visitors Bureau, which was financed by the state's first hotel tax earmarked for tourism promotion. Crowley and a generation of Newport civic and business leaders searched for an economic engine after the loss of the naval fleet, which devastated the Aquidneck Island economy in the mid-1970s.

Tourism became the answer. Crowley worked with community leaders to build Newport's reputation as a year-round destination. He spearheaded efforts to bring chefs from Kinsale, Ireland to Newport. Crowley's grandparents emigrated from near Kinsale to Newport and Kinsale and Newport became sister cities.

It wasn't his desire to enhance tourism alone that spurred him to develop the sister city relationship and to expand Newport's St. Patrick's Day festivities from a weekend to a month through his association with the Irish Heritage Association. It was a tribute to his ancestry. He undertook these endeavors "not to pump himself up, but for the benefit of the community," said Richard E. O'Neill, a former Newport city councilman who founded the Irish Heritage Association with Crowley 31 years ago.

Said Senate Majority Leader Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport: "Paul had a strong sense of history, the history of his community, the history of his family, the history of Ireland, the history of Rhode Island and the history of the Assembly as an institution."

Education, however, is where Crowley invested most of his energy. At a time when teacher's unions were very influential at the State House, Crowley tussled with union leaders for years until school accountability legislation became law in 1997, authorizing state intervention in failing public schools and using extensive testing to measure student performance.

Crowley also had long favored consolidation of school districts and a single statewide teacher's contract that would rein in growing teacher salaries. As recently as last June, Crowley was pushing for changes to labor and governance structures that stood in the way of a stable statewide funding formula for education, Education Commissioner McWalters said.

Crowley also took stands on other major issues. He opposed early proposals for a casino in Newport, and more recently, the proposed Harrah's Narragansett Indian casino in West Warwick. He supported tax incentives for energy savings and regionalization of municipal services decades before those concepts were realized. He recently proposed measures that would protect coastal residents from rising homeowner's insurance rates.

Despite the serious issues he grappled with at the State House, Crowley was always personable and not without a healthy amount of good cheer.

In 1999, mall developer Aram Garabedian became the lone independent in the overwhelmingly Democratic General Assembly. Crowley posted a sign on the phone booth outside the House chamber. It read: "Representative Aram Garabedian. Mini Minority Leader. Please knock."

U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, who considered Crowley a mentor, said he received a card from the legislator that boosted his spirits when they were exceptionally low. In 2006, Kennedy crashed his car in Washington, D.C., and eventually admitted he had been driving under the influence of prescription drugs, an acknowledgment that led him to seek help at a rehabilitation clinic.

He wrote, "The greatest love one can have is for themselves; may [you] find that kind of love. For a guy who is kind of an old, masculine guy and holds no punches, it was a really moving thing. He wanted the best for me. It showed the generosity of spirit he had.

In February 2006, Crowley was diagnosed with stage-three malignant melanoma, a deadly form of skin cancer. He received treatment and returned to the State House in May 2006 to a standing ovation. By the end of the 2006 legislative session, Crowley had secured the funds for a new alternate high school in Newport.

Crowley won another election last fall; at that time, he said his prognosis looked good. Despite the cancer's return, he remained active through the end of the 2007 legislative session in June.

"He showed an unbelievable strength and courage in the way he handled this," said Paiva Weed. "He was an example for us all, right until the end."

Crowley leaves his wife, Diana, and three children, with whom he lived on Harrison Avenue. A Mass of Christian Burial will be held Thursday at 10 a.m., at St. Augustin Church, Carroll Avenue, Newport.

A special election will be held at an undetermined date to fill the vacant seat, according to Larry Berman, a spokesman for the House.

Written by Gina Macris, Richard Salit, Meaghan Wims and Scott MacKay

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