

**In Memory of Congressman Peter W. Rodino, Jr.**



**1909–2005**

## **Keep That Good Heart: The Life and Legacy of Congressman Peter W. Rodino, Jr.**

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The last words spoken to me by my beloved mentor and friend, Congressman Peter W. Rodino, just days before his passing, were: “Keep that good heart.” In those four words we find the measure of the man and the magnitude of his legacy. Keep that good heart, mindful that there will be many temptations to do otherwise. This life can be a vessel of sadness, but even in the face of all disenchantment, cynicism and disappointment, keep that good heart.

Peter Rodino asked us to be relentless in our capacity to anchor ourselves in love, in compassion, in humility and in virtue, no matter the naysayers. We live in a world that finds itself preoccupied with glamour and status and fortune and fame. Yet, here is this iconic public figure, who walked with kings and held the hand of a nation as he navigated the way out of a constitutional crisis of unparalleled dimension, who valued, above all else, goodness of heart. He respected intelligence, and he was brilliant, but he respected kindness even more.

And so it was, with great love, that this humble boy from Newark, the son of a carpenter and the child of Italian immigrants, moved mountains. His illustrious career in the House of Representatives began in 1948, and spanned four decades. Always, he ran on his own terms, never beholden to anyone or anything. He sought public office as a politician in the highest and best sense of the word. He was a champion of the underdog and a spokesman for those without a voice. It has been said that the principal cause of human suffering is forgetfulness. Peter never forgot who he was, what he stood for or where he came from.

John Henry Newman wrote, “I sought to hear the voice of God, and climbed the topmost steeple. But God declared, ‘Go down again. I dwell among the people.’” Peter Rodino heard the voice of God in the voices of the people. And there, he found the courage to do what needed to be done. He came to the House to

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accomplish civil rights reform, to redress the inequities of the nation's immigration laws and to promote equal access to justice for all. And so he did.

Quietly, during a time when such an agenda for reform was fiercely unpopular, he worked relentlessly, securing a seat on the House Judiciary Committee and serving as a key lieutenant whose work in the trenches, on the floor of the House, helped to secure the passage of virtually every major civil rights bill, including the watershed Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham, Alabama contains the historic photograph of President Lyndon B. Johnson signing that landmark legislation into law, flanked by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to his left and Congressman Peter Rodino to his right.

Congressman Rodino was a champion for the cause of civil rights and civil liberties because he chose to be a man for *all* people, irrespective of race, class, gender or ethnic origin. It is no accident that, until his last days, he carried in his pocket a tattered copy of the Preamble to the United States Constitution. The Preamble begins with the words, "We the people." It holds out the promise that the blessings of liberty belong not just to some of us, but to all of us.

In 1974, this great patriot had a date with destiny. As a country on the brink of a constitutional impasse waited (and this fourteen year old sat transfixed in front of the television set), the Watergate hearings began. In Peter Rodino, humility met preparation, and the boy from Barringer High School, who had dedicated a lifetime to the cause of fundamental fairness and equal justice under law, accepted the challenge.

We watched as the gentleman from Newark, carrying the weight of a nation's suffering on his shoulders, stood firm and dignified and tall, never wavering from his reverence for the office of the presidency and never departing from his conviction that our great democracy would withstand, indeed, transcend, this greatest test.

Because of him, it did. And because of him, we did. In the process, Peter Rodino gave us something that we desperately needed. He gave us hope. Timothy White wrote, "Historically, certain figures emerge from despairing cultures to reinterpret old symbols and beliefs and invest them with new meaning. An individual's decision to play such a role may be purely unconscious, but it can sometimes evolve into an acute awareness that he or she may indeed have the gift, as well as the burden, of prophecy." Peter

Rodino was such a figure. Senator Ted Kennedy, in sending his condolences, said: “Many of us felt as we watched the Watergate hearings that we were seeing a founding father in action, living the highest ideals of the Constitution. I’m sure my brother would have called him a profile in courage. I feel the same way, and I’ll never forget him.”

When all is said and done, none of us will ever forget Peter Rodino, because of the way that he made us feel. His life bears living witness to the greatness of our nation. His story reminds us that we live in a world of infinite possibilities, and that there is a force that meets good with good. We watched, and we knew. Here was a gifted leader who was, first and foremost, a good person. It is a testament to the man that, when the vote to impeach was rendered, rather than grandstand or resort to petty partisanship, Peter Rodino retreated to his private chambers and wept. Always, he kept that good heart.

Congressman Rodino spoke to our community last October, at the Rodino Society Dinner, and urged us to live a life that matters. What will matter, he said, is not your success, but your significance; not what you bought, but what you built. A life that matters is a life lived with great love.

Congressman Rodino, we bask in the glow of your magnificent heart. And although our own hearts ache because your days on Earth have come to an end, we know that the angels rejoiced as they welcomed you home. We know that you must have received the most extraordinary standing ovation of all time, amidst the resounding cheers and the tears of joy, all proclaiming: “Well done, Mr. Chairman, well done.”