

TRIBUTE

A TRIBUTE TO SENATOR MATTHEW FELDMAN

*Senator John A. Lynch**

Senator Matthew Feldman¹ lived the kind of public and private life that inspired affection and deserved admiration. Most of us who, like the Senator, have chosen a life that includes public service, could do no better than to live up to his example.

His personal story is one of compassion and courage. He never dismissed those who sought his help and he never shied away from taking a stand on the controversial issues of the day. Racism, hatred, and bigotry had no place in his life. He was a rare man of intelligence and integrity; of deeply held religious and moral convictions; of patience and tolerance for all but the intolerant. He was committed to the politics of inclusion and opportunity. And he used his considerable diplomatic skill and determination in pursuit of those ideals.

Matty began his public, political life in 1958 when he was elected to the Township Council in Teaneck, where he was re-elected in 1962. Twice during his service on the Council, he was chosen as mayor by his fellow councilmen. From 1968 through 1972, he was the Bergen County Democratic Chairman. In both

* Senator John A. Lynch, a Democrat, has represented New Jersey's 17th District, which encompasses parts of Middlesex, Somerset, and Union Counties, in the New Jersey Senate since 1982. He is currently the Senate Minority Leader, a position he has held since 1992. He served as the Senate President from 1986 until 1990. He was the Mayor of New Brunswick from 1978 through 1990.

Sen. Lynch has sponsored more than 100 laws, including the law protecting New Jersey's freshwater wetlands and the law that created funding sources for cultural arts, historic preservation, and green acres. He wrote the 1991 property-tax reform program, which provided \$360 million to urban and suburban communities, thus stabilizing property taxes for the first time in 10 years. He also wrote the Urban Enterprise Act and he helped to create the Fair Housing Council.

Sen. Lynch also practices law with the North Brunswick firm of Lynch, Philibosian, Chansky, Fitzgerald, and Kane.

¹ Senator Feldman passed away on April 11, 1994. Pat R. Gilbert & David Gibson, *Longtime N.J. Senator Matthew Feldman Dies, 'Always Wanted to Do What Was Right,'* THE RECORD (Northern N.J.), Apr. 12, 1994, at A1. See also, Michael Markowitz, *'He Really Cared': Friends, Colleagues Pay Tribute To Feldman's Public Service.* He was 75. Gilbert & Gibson, *supra*.

positions, Matty served the local community and the Democratic Party with loyalty and distinction. But it was in 1966 that Matty became Senator Feldman. He served for two years, the second as the Assistant Majority Leader, before taking over as County Chair.

In 1973, when he returned to the Senate, Matty began two uninterrupted decades of public service in Trenton. His colleagues tapped him for leadership positions time and again. He served in 1974 and 1975 as Majority leader. In 1976 and 1977 he served as the Senate President and from 1978 through 1984 as President Pro Tempore. Through both difficult and exciting times, Matty's genius for conciliation guided his Democratic colleagues in the Senate. He always championed the notion that, even when compromise seems impossible, if the lines of communication are kept open, a solution can be worked out. That is not an easy position to carry during heated debate among people of strong opinion. But Matty managed—and in so doing, earned genuine respect on both sides of the aisle.

No one held stronger convictions than Matty or acted on them with more faith and force. His commitment to family and religion shaped each day of his public life. He was a devoted husband, father, and Jew. A World War II Air Force veteran, he was state commander of the Jewish War Veterans. He served on a number of boards, representing a variety of causes, including the Urban League of Bergen County, Holy Name Hospital, and the Bergen County Council of Girl Scouts. He was a member of the New Jersey-Israel Commission and, for thirteen years, a member of the Education Commission of the States.

That brings us to what is, inarguably, the issue that best defines this public man. Though his accomplishments span the spectrum, as a legislator Senator Feldman had the most impact on, and passion for, issues of public education in New Jersey. He chaired the Senate Education Committee, the Joint Committee on Public Schools, and the State Library Committee.

He sponsored the bill that created the Department of Higher Education² because, at the time, Rutgers was the only public col-

² N.J. STAT. ANN. §§ 18A:3-1 to 3-23 (West 1966). The Republican-dominated N.J. Legislature and the Whitman Administration were recently successful in their bid to pass a bill abolishing the Department of Higher Education. Higher Education Restructuring Act of 1994, S. 1118, 206th N.J. Leg., 1st Sess. (1994) (enacted). See also Devin Leonard, *Higher Ed Department Out; Abolishment Bill Signed*, THE RECORD (North-

lege in New Jersey, outside of several small teachers' colleges. Matty believed New Jersey should develop a system of colleges state-wide which would ensure that higher education was an option for every resident. Former Chancellor Dr. T. Edward Hollander said of Senator Feldman, "[N]o one has done more for education in New Jersey in this century." That is high praise, though not hyperbole. Today, New Jersey can boast about the number and quality of institutions of higher education throughout the state due, in large part, to the efforts of this one man.

Matty's efforts, however, were not confined to problems with higher education. As Senate President, he used his unparalleled skill as a builder of unlikely coalitions to shepherd through the first state income tax³ which was dedicated, in part, to public education. It is not hard to imagine the intensity of the resistance to that legislation, but Matty was motivated, as usual, by the needs and concerns of the children. He was convinced that the way to ensure that those needs were met throughout the State was to provide a stable source of funding for the public school system. Matty brought a sense of honest conviction and persuasion to the crisis which resulted in a long-awaited solution to the funding dilemma.

For these reasons among many, I was proud to co-sponsor, with Senator Byron Baer, a bill to rename the Department of Education Building the "Matthew Feldman Building."⁴ For this man,

ern N.J.), June 24, 1994, at A3 [hereinafter *Bill Signed*]. The Governor, in accordance with many Republican legislators, believed that the Department, which was responsible for overseeing the state's colleges and universities, stifled creativity through over-regulation. *Id.* The new law provides for the replacement of the Department with a Higher Education Council and a President's Council. *Id.* The law was passed by the New Jersey Senate on June 13, 1994 and by the Assembly on June 16, 1994 in a 51-23 vote. Devin Leonard, *Higher Ed Department Gets the Ax*, THE RECORD (Northern, N.J.), June 17, 1994, at A1. Not a single one of the 51 affirmative votes was by a Democrat. *Id.* Governor Whitman signed the bill into law on June 23, 1994. *Bill Signed, supra.*

The law abolishing the Department of Higher Education became effective July 1, 1994. *Id.* In existence since 1966, the state Board of Higher Education met for the last time on June 30, 1994. Devin Leonard, *Dire Predictions for Future; Higher Ed Board Has Last Meeting*, THE RECORD (Northern N.J.), July 1, 1994, at A3. The Higher Education Chancellor, Edward D. Goldberg, who fought unsuccessfully against the bill's passage, resigned on July 1, 1994. Devon Leonard, *Higher Ed Chancellor Gets Paid to Quit Job, Waged Losing Fight to Preserve Agency*, THE RECORD (Northern N.J.), July 12, 1994, at A8.

³ New Jersey Gross Income Tax Act, N.J. STAT. ANN. §§ 54A:1-1 to 10-12 (West 1976).

⁴ See S. 1213, 206th N.J. Leg., 1st Sess. (1994).

there is no more appropriate monument to construct; no greater honor to bestow.

I have been in the New Jersey Legislature since 1982 and have seen many good people come and go. There has been no finer person to walk the Statehouse halls, no finer politician, statesman, or friend. That is, inarguably, what best defines this private man. He was a pure people person—warm, above board, open. The entire state of New Jersey can be proud of this native son. In life, he was all that we hope to be. Now that he is gone, he is proudly and lovingly remembered. We will miss him day to day, but his legacy will live on.