

HOW I SEE IT

Tim Maloney

A Public Life to Applaud

The Washington Post

11-30-03

Marylanders have just witnessed history, the conclusion of a public life truly worth living. It was, of course, the life of Del. Howard "Pete" Rawlings, who died at 66 on Nov. 14 after a four-year battle with cancer.

Although well known around Baltimore, Rawlings was not a household name in the D.C. area, even though his influence in Prince George's and Montgomery counties was profound. For more than 25 years in the state legislature, the last 11 as chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Rawlings had arguably more effect on Maryland residents than most of the Free State's governors.

Rawlings helped create Maryland's higher education reorganization act and was the impetus behind the restructuring of troubled public school systems in Baltimore City and Prince George's County. He helped shape the modern Maryland Medicaid program and was the father of the state's housing policy.

But Rawlings was much more than the sum of his extraordinary accomplishments. His career is an example of the power of moral courage in public office.

A mathematician by training, Rawlings arrived in Annapolis in 1979 after having taught in Maryland colleges and having worked as an activist on the desegregation of higher education. He loved to remember when he felt his first calling for public office.

"I was speaking at a faculty rally and gave a great speech," he'd explain. "And when I finished, I set my faculty ID card on fire. The crowd loved it."

Once Rawlings came to Annapolis, he didn't have to light matches to be heard, nor did he strive to be a crowd pleaser. On the floor of the House, he would speak quietly and deliberately. The usually boisterous House would grow still, knowing that his message would be

filled with hard truths and wise counsel.

Rawlings grew to be the legislature's expert on the budget. He demonstrated the political maturity to put fiscal integrity ahead of his social justice commitments, as painful as it often was. As governors and fiscal leaders came and went, he became the institutional memory on the budget, lending the reassuring sense that the state's finances were under adult supervision.

Rawlings's values were shaped in the Poe Homes, a public housing project in Baltimore, where he grew up. He remembered that "there were six of us, three in a bed, and life was good and secure and safe, and everyone was part of your family." His parents educated all six children on his father's postal worker salary, and each child went on to a substantial career.

Cont.

Cont.

Rawlings's rise from Poe Homes became the formative experience of his political life. It shaped his commitment to education and housing and gave him the strength to overcome entrenched opposition to his reform efforts.

But the delegate's greatest legacy will be in the public schools. Rawlings devoted a decade to reforming Baltimore's public schools, ordering management audits and impounding funds, until finally, in 1997, the legislature overhauled the system management and appropriated \$254 million in new money. Baltimore schoolchildren now are posting higher test scores for the first time in a generation. Rawlings spearheaded similar efforts in Prince George's.

For his courageous efforts, Rawlings was brutally criticized by groups that might have seemed to be his natural allies: labor, the NAACP and Baltimore officials. He took their criticisms in stride. He was that rarest of politicians, one for whom political fear did not exist. He loved to tally up the cards and letters that the interest groups would send to fight his latest reform initiative. And when the attacks turned personal, he would offer a lovely smile, knowing that the intellectual arsenal of his opposition had been exhausted.

The modern political culture frowns on the kind of legislative life led by Pete Rawlings. No political consultant would recommend it. Today, many politicians spend their days on fundraising call lists, cocktail parties, "photo op" public hearings and partisan posturing.

This stands in stark contrast to the life of Pete Rawlings. He had no ambition for higher office. Instead, he had a deep ambition to bring a better life to the poor children of Maryland. He leaves behind a historic record of accomplishment, but perhaps his deepest legacy will be his example on how to live a public life, fully, wisely and courageously.

The writer, a lawyer and former Democratic member of the Maryland General Assembly, served with Howard Rawlings for 16 years. His e-mail address is tmaloney@jglaw.com.