

Herb Kohl Foundation: Statement on passing of U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 27, 2023

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

It is with deep sadness that the Herb Kohl Foundation announces the death of its benefactor, U.S. Senator Herb Kohl, at the age of 88 following a brief illness.

Senator Kohl leaves behind an unmatched legacy. He grew up in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee and after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, earning an MBA from Harvard and joining the Army Reserve, he followed in his father's footsteps and built with his brothers a chain of over 50 Kohl's grocery stores across the Midwest.

When the Milwaukee Bucks were put up for sale and in danger of being bought and moved to another city, Herb stepped forward in 1985 and bought the team with the promise to its fans that they would never leave. When the time came to sell the team, he fulfilled that promise and donated \$100 million to help in building a new arena for the community.

Herb answered a call to public service in 1988 and ran for the United States Senate with a commitment to being "nobody's Senator but yours" and working across party lines for the people of the state he loved. He served 24 years in the Senate and following his retirement devoted his energies to continuing a lifetime commitment to philanthropic work through the Herb Kohl Foundation.

"Throughout his life, Herb Kohl always put people first—from his employees and their families to his customers and countless charitable organizations and efforts." Joanne Anton, Director of Giving for Herb Kohl Philanthropies recalled. "Herb Kohl Way isn't just the name of a street in front of the Fiserv Forum. The Herb Kohl Way perfectly sums up a legacy of humility, commitment, compromise, and kindness to countless people he worked with, served and helped along the way. Those values

will live on through his Foundation.”

EARLY LIFE

Herb Kohl never took the good fortune of his life for granted. His family’s American dream began when his father, Max, emigrated from Poland and his mother, Mary, came from Russia.

As did other immigrants at the time, the new couple worked hard and decided to open a corner food market beneath their apartment in 1927. Herb and his three siblings, Sidney, Delores and Allen, would recall that conversations around their dinner table were rarely about business but rather focused on how each of them were doing in school and how all of them could and should do more to help others.

“They always looked forward to the future with optimism and determination,” Herb remembered, “And they showed us that your life would be measured far more by what you contribute than by what you have.”

In 1946, at age 11, Kohl cut the ribbon at his family’s first supermarket, which would soon expand to multiple locations. In 1962, the family opened the first Kohl’s department store.

Kohl grew up in the Sherman Park neighborhood of Milwaukee and met friends who he would share a lifetime with –Bud Selig, Steve Marcus, and Frank Gimbel.

BUILDING AN ICONIC WISCONSIN BUSINESS

In 1970, Herb became president of the Kohl’s Corporation, which would eventually expand to 50 supermarkets and several department stores.

First working under his father, Herb would remember him as one of the best bosses you could have. “He gave me permission to make mistakes. I made a lot of them but each time, my father would just ask: ‘What did you learn from this? Are you going to make the same mistake again?’ Learning from mistakes was an important part of taking risks and being successful.”

Another key element of the Kohl family success was the hands-on, personal commitment they each brought to the business. Herb loved the job and traveled the state, visiting stores, bagging groceries and conducting many job interviews himself. He made it a point to talk to employees in every job—from the bakery to

the meat department to the checkout aisle. He knew virtually every employee by their first names and usually also something about their families.

That commitment engendered deep loyalty. Employees stayed for years, if not their entire careers. They had their own credit union and health insurance. They had five weeks of paid vacation. They received employee discounts and grocery coupons to buy Christmas dinner for their families. Herb would often simply say: "Our employees were extensions of our family."

Treating his employees like family was one of the hallmarks of Herb Kohl's life. After Kohl's, Herb took a personal interest in the lives of the players on his basketball team. When, for example, the Bucks drafted Giannis Antetokounmpo and his family remained in Greece unable to join their son and brother in the United States, Herb worked tirelessly and successfully to reunite them in America. The Antetokounmpos were his family. The Kohl Senate office always boasted amongst the longest tenured staff created by a supportive work culture that insisted on work/life balance and prioritizing family above all else.

A SECOND CAREER IN PUBLIC SERVICE

Even before he sought public office, Herb had a long interest in public policy issues, government and politics. He read six or seven newspapers every day and followed politics closely. Governor Pat Lucey asked him to serve as Democratic Party Chair in 1975 and he considered a run for the Senate in 1986. In 1988, when longtime Senator Bill Proxmire announced his retirement, Herb entered the race in late Spring and won a hard-fought Democratic primary and general election.

Two essential factors proved critical to success in the campaign. The first was Herb's pledge to not accept contributions from political action committees or other special interest groups. As he said when he kicked off his 1988 campaign:

"The important thing is that when the campaign is over, I will owe nothing to anybody but the people of Wisconsin." Herb wanted to be Wisconsin's representative in Washington, not Washington's representative to Wisconsin.

A second critical factor was the thousands of Kohl's employees around the state who testified to his values and his concern for their families and their lives.

"We used to call the Kohl's bakery ladies "our base," Herb would recall, " and

indeed they were just that.”

Longtime friend and former Marquette coach, Al McGuire, introduced Herb at the campaign kickoff by saying, “There are two kinds of people in this world—cloth napkin kind of people and paper napkin kind of people. me and Herb, we’re paper napkin kind of people.”

The description captured the essence of Herb Kohl and his connection with people. Even when he owned an NBA team, he sat with the crowd rather than at courtside or in a luxury box. He drove himself in a decades-old Buick and lived in the same Milwaukee condominium for over 50 years. He ate at “paper napkin” restaurants like George Webb and Ma Fischer’s and always chose to be well taken care of by the great waitstaff at Benjy’s Deli and the Pfister Café (where they named a sandwich after him.).

Herb never sought to live away from people but rather with them. Another hallmark of his life was he never chose friends based on who they were or their status. Instead, he based all his friendships on whether they shared his values.

That meant deep and enduring friendships—held and maintained over decades—with people from all walks of life.

Herb won the Senate race in 1988 and held onto it without a serious challenge for 24 years. He did it by bringing his business experience to his Senate office and treating his five million Wisconsin constituents as his customers.

A 24 YEAR CAREER IN THE SENATE

Herb’s Senate colleagues from both sides of aisle often described him as a “workhorse, not a show horse Senator”—someone who didn’t give frequent and endless speeches or seek television cameras and the limelight but persistently worked with colleagues to advance legislation and policy initiatives he cared about and he thought were important for the people of Wisconsin.

That included fighting every day for dairy farmers, working to protect kids from the threat of gun violence, helping seniors secure and keep high quality health care and, especially, supporting education from early childhood through technical college and the university.

When, for example, it came time to compromise or make cuts on government

spending bills, Senator Kohl always insisted that education was off the table. Nothing brought a quicker or more genuine smile to his face than when he met a child on a visit to their grade school classroom or in a restaurant or supermarket.

“My parents taught me the immeasurable value of a good education,” Herb would say, “Education is an investment with the greatest return. It is also the great equalizer.”

Senator Kohl served on the Judiciary and Appropriations Committees and was chairman of the Senate Committee on Aging. Herb’s significant record of achievement over 24 years in the Senate helped shape the state and better the nation.

Starting from the premise that jobs are not a partisan issue, Herb worked across the aisle and across Wisconsin to attract and sustain vital businesses, big and small. He sponsored federal initiatives that built on Wisconsin’s traditional strength in manufacturing, agriculture and high tech innovation; put in place training programs to prepare Wisconsinites for the jobs of the future; and championed public-private partnerships to provide technical support to small and mid-sized manufacturers.

Herb worked hard for working families, successfully sponsoring legislation to expand safe and affordable childcare for parents of all income levels, and promoting a tax code that lets low and middle-income families keep more of what they earn. Herb tirelessly defended America’s Dairyland and rural Americans, taking aim at the milk marketing order system that penalized Wisconsin dairy farmers for being productive and fighting regional dairy compacts that distorted the markets for dairy products.

Of Herb’s determination to defeat the Northeast Dairy Compact, Sen. Robert Byrd, a powerful member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said:

“He is the Stonewall Jackson of Wisconsin. He stands like a stone wall. If I had the voice of Jove, I would shout from the ends of the earth. Yet I would not be able to move this man, Herb Kohl, when he takes a determined stand. He has been talking with me time and time again about this issue that is so important to him and the people of Wisconsin. He has been absolutely indefatigable; he has been unshakable, and I salute him. He has stood up for the people of Wisconsin. That is what I like about him. He stands for principle. He stands for his people. The people of Wisconsin have a real treasure in Herb Kohl, and I have a real treasure in Herb Kohl

as a friend.”

Herb used his position as chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations panel for more than promoting Wisconsin’s dairy interests; it also allowed him to have significant impacts on nutrition programs for children. Herb expanded after-school feeding programs and launched school breakfast start-up grants. He expanded summer food service for students, and led the charge to fund the WIC program, which provides nutrition assistance to pregnant women, infants and children. Herb also played a significant role in enacting legislation to protect food safety, the first major reform of the U.S. food system in 70 years.

As a member of the Judiciary Committee, Herb worked to provide funding for police departments across Wisconsin; to advance legislation for child safety locks on handguns; to strengthen efforts in the state to fight drug trafficking; and to institute ratings for video games. Herb’s work as chairman of the Judiciary’s Antitrust subcommittee touched nearly every vital industry sector affecting American consumers, including health care, energy, high tech industries, transportation and aviation, retailing, telecommunications and agriculture.

Throughout his tenure and as Chairman of the Senate Aging Committee, Herb championed initiatives to get individuals, families and communities the health insurance and care they needed, focusing on the most vulnerable – children and seniors – and the most difficult to reach – rural communities. Herb was instrumental in expanding health services to rural areas of Wisconsin, including dental care; he led investigations into the pharmaceutical industry and followed with legislation to improve the quality, reduce the cost and increase access to prescription drugs; he fought to protect and extend SeniorCare; he led the effort to improve the quality and options for long-term care; and he worked to expand the health care workforce for geriatrics, long-term care providers, direct care workers and family caregivers.

While Herb spent his Senate career looking for ways to reduce federal spending, the one area he consistently worked to increase the federal investment was education. Herb secured funding for school districts to promote better use of technology in the classroom; he sponsored legislation that went on to serve as a model for the No Child Left Behind Act; he supported teacher education programs at Wisconsin colleges and universities; he fought for increased funding for students with disabilities; he helped restore funding for dropout prevention and supported dual enrollment programs; and worked to ensure access to education at all levels, including college and vocational education.

In keeping with his commitment to treating his Wisconsin constituents with the same philosophy and spirit as he treated his customers at Kohl's, Herb staffed his Wisconsin district offices with professionals committed to outreach and rapid response when anyone—from a local business to a non-profit group or school district, to an individual Wisconsinite—needed someone to listen and help navigate Washington on their behalf.

His office earned the reputation as one of the best customer service operations in the U.S. Senate. If a constituent called about a missing Social Security check, his staff would promptly track it down. Every phone call was returned, and every letter answered.

After 24 years of service, Kohl retired from the Senate in 2012. Said President Barack Obama, "America's children will grow up in a better place thanks to his advocacy on behalf of childhood nutrition programs, a strengthened food safety system, access to affordable health care and childcare, and juvenile crime prevention. Herb's dedication to American families and businesses remains evident today in the robust farming and manufacturing sector he helped foster in his home state of Wisconsin. And he has been a constant advocate to ensure that seniors in Wisconsin and across the country have access to affordable prescription drugs."

His successor in the United States Senate, Senator Tammy Baldwin reflected on his time there this way: "He saw it as his job to give a voice to people who need to be heard in Washington — children, working families, and farmers. I think when you ask people what they want public service to be, Herb's legacy is a shining example of what it can and should be."

In reaching his decision to retire even though he was still on the top of his game and had carried each of the 72 counties in Wisconsin in his previous re-election, Herb told his staff and his friends that it's "always better to leave one year too early than one year too late."

When he left the Senate, he did with these words:

My colleagues in this body are, to a man or woman, thoughtful, hard-working patriots. We don't always agree — understandably. But every Senator I have met is pursuing a course that he or she believes is best for the nation and advocating policies that he or she believes are best for their state. And when I have come to any of you with my ideas about what's best for the nation or for my state, you have

listened respectfully, counseled wisely, and helped when you could. Thank you.

My final thanks go to the extraordinary people of Wisconsin. Thank you for letting me pay back in part the great debt my family owes to the state that took in my immigrant mother and father and allowed our family — including my brothers Sidney and Allen and our sister Dolores — to grow and thrive. Thank you for taking a chance on me in that first election 24 years ago and renewing my contract three more times. Thank you for trusting me with your problems and concerns, your hopes and dreams.

A RETURN TO WISCONSIN

Herb returned to Wisconsin in 2013 with two priorities in mind: Immersing himself in his role as President of the Milwaukee Bucks and securing their long term future in Milwaukee, and expanding the work of the Herb Kohl Foundation.

It soon became clear that an essential component of keeping his promise to keep the Bucks in Wisconsin required a new state of the art arena. The lease with the Bradley Center was due to run out soon and without a new lease or facility, the future of the franchise was in doubt. There were a number of larger media markets looking for a franchise to move to their cities.

In concert with NBA Commissioner Adam Silver, Herb worked tirelessly to measure state and local political support for a new facility. Eventually it became clear that was unlikely to happen under his ownership.

So Herb sought and found new owners interested in buying the team and also willing to sign a long term agreement guaranteeing the team would stay in Milwaukee forever. To ensure the deal, Herb agreed to contribute \$100 million of his own money to the new facility—a first of its' kind commitment from a former owner. In addition to the arena contribution, Herb also gave bonuses at the time of the sale to every Bucks and Bradley Center employee, thereby ensuring that all members of his Bucks family shared in the benefits of his decision to sell the team.

On the day the sale was announced, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver praised Herb's "extraordinary impact on his home city of Milwaukee and state of Wisconsin." "His historic and unprecedented \$100 million gift to the city of Milwaukee to secure the future of his franchise emphatically underscores his passion, commitment and generosity to his community."

In 2021, the Milwaukee Bucks, led by two players who Herb had secured in the two years before he sold the team—Kris Middleton and Giannis Antetokounmpo—won their first NBA championship in 50 years. In recalling Herb's impact, Daniel Simmons wrote in the Milwaukee Magazine soon after: "Without Herb Kohl, children in Las Vegas or Seattle likely would have been learning the legend of Giannis one syllable at a time."

Max Kohl once told his son, Herb of the old adage "Money is like manure; it's not good unless you spread it around." Herb also often recalled that both his parents taught he and his siblings that they would be measured far more by what they contributed than by what they had.

In 1990, he started the Herb Kohl Educational Foundation, which has provided more than \$34 million in grants and scholarships to Wisconsin students, teachers, and schools.

After the UW struggled for years to fund a new sports facility to augment the aging Field House, Kohl stepped forward with a \$25 million lead gift in 1995 for the basketball and hockey center that still bears his name. In 2016, he turned his attention back to policymaking, with gifts to the UW's La Follette School of Public Affairs to establish the Herb Kohl Public Service Research Competition, which supports evidence-based policy and governance research by faculty members and students. Topics have ranged from childhood poverty and solar energy to water quality and opioid prescriptions.

In all of his charitable endeavors, Kohl always prioritized protecting and helping young people reach their fullest potential. He invested in early childhood and K-12 education and the leaders and organizations that made a difference. He created Learning Journeys that connected Wisconsin students to Washington D.C. through the gift of educational travel.

Herb considered himself lucky and realized that much had come to him because of his family and his obligation was to give back more than he received. That, in turn, led to an innate modesty and humility rare for someone with his long list of achievements. More than anything, Herb loved Milwaukee and Wisconsin, and that is where he chose to live out his days. He touched an incalculable number of lives, and those who love him would remark that he is among the most decent people to ever walk the earth. Herb's loss will be felt acutely, and he can best be honored by doing good works.