

NEWS OBITUARIES

Willis Eken, former House majority leader

● The Twin Valley legislator was at the forefront of creating special education programs for kids and adults.

By JIM ADAMS
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Willis Eken never expected to become a state legislator. But that changed for the western Minnesota dairy farmer after a mentally disabled son was born. Eken set out to improve education for special-needs children and wound up at the State Capitol.

Eken, 79, of Twin Valley, died of complications of Alzheimer's disease Saturday at a nursing home near his farm, said Rep. Kent Eken, DFL-Twin Valley, who now represents his dad's district.

His father, who was elected to the House in 1971, served as majority leader from 1981 to 1984. After that he became president of the Minnesota Farmers Union.

Eken said that when his brother Kyle, now deceased, was a little boy in the 1960s, the state had no special education programs. His parents were told they could keep him home with no education or send him to a state institution.

"Dad said neither one of those options was acceptable to him, and he started a movement for special education programs for mentally dis-



Willis Eken

abled kids in our area," said Eken, 46, a teacher. His father got a special-needs program going in nearby Ada with state and school district funding,

as well as an activity center for mentally disabled adults, Eken said.

Not long after being elected to the House, Eken was selected as chairman of a school finance committee, said former state Sen. Roger Moe, of Erskine, who was elected the same year that Eken was.

"He had a high school education, but he was instinctively smart and had great people skills," Moe said. "He was instrumental in writing the school finance formulas for a number of years, and then was named majority leader because of his leadership talent. He was always civil and polite, but he was tough when he had to be tough."

Moe was Senate majority leader when Eken had that role in the House. They butted heads a few times in conference committees while reconciling House and Senate bills. "He pounded on my desk a

time or two, but we never let that bother us," Moe said. "We negotiated hard for our own positions and when it was all over, he was always a gentleman."

In their first year, Moe and Eken voted for the Minnesota Miracle, a 1971 law aimed at equalizing public services by shifting major funding of public schools and local government from local property taxes to state income and sales taxes.

Kent Eken said his father was guided by the idea that "no matter where children lived, rural or urban; or what their parents' financial position, rich or poor; or what

their mental capacity, gifted or mentally disabled, they all deserved a chance to develop to their fullest potential."

In addition to Kent, Eken is survived by his wife, Betty; two other sons, Loren, of Twin Valley, and Lee, of Ada; a sister, Marjorie Dahl, of Battle Lake, Minn.; nine grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

Services will be held at 2 p.m. Tuesday at Zion Lutheran Church in Twin Valley, with visitation at the church one hour before services and from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday at the Anderson Funeral Home in Twin Valley.

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