

Reprinted by permission of the **Star Tribune** (Minneapolis, MN).

ALLAN SPEAR 1937-2008

Senator, in championing justice, saw role beyond that of pioneer

By JON TEVLIN
jtevlin@startribune.com

10-13-2008

Allan Spear, a former president of the Minnesota Senate, civil rights champion, historian and one of the first openly gay state legislators in the country, died Saturday of complications following surgery.

Spear, 71, recently named one of the 150 Minnesotans who shaped our state by the Minnesota Historical Society, was a charismatic speaker who constantly fought for the rights of the vulnerable, from members of minority groups to prisoners, during his 28-year tenure in the Legislature.



Allan Spear

Friends described Spear as a Renaissance man, with an encyclopedic knowledge of history and a passion for cooking, travel and classical music. He lived with his partner, Junjiro Tsuji, for more

than 20 years.

Spear's sense of humor was legendary on the Senate floor, where he annually fought against a hunting season for mourning doves by

Spear continues: Influence went beyond Minnesota's borders. **B5** ▶

Spear saw his role beyond that of pioneer

◀ SPEAR FROM B1

reciting a hilarious recipe that underscored the ridiculously large number of the birds needed to create a meal.

"He was a brilliant thinker and such a generous friend who was deeply committed to economic and social justice," said Rep. Karen Clark, DFL-Minneapolis.

Clark, who worked for years with Spear on a state human rights bill that included protection for people based on their sexual orientation, said Spear became a mentor to gay and lesbian public officials nationwide.

Spear served in the Minnesota Senate from 1972 to 2000, when he retired. He was president of the Senate from 1993 to 2000 and was the first nonlawyer to head the Senate Judiciary Committee. He represented a Minneapolis district that included the University of Minnesota campus.

'Extremely fair'

Though former Sen. Tom Neuville, a Republican who is now a judge, was considerably more conservative than Spear and disagreed on many social issues, he often agreed with him on criminal justice issues. "He was an extremely fair and straightforward chair of the committee," said Neuville. "He treated everyone fairly, and as a member of the minority party, I really appreciated that."



File photo by DAVID BREWSTER • dbrewster@startribune.com

SENATE PRESIDENT'S DUTY: When then-Gov. Arne Carlson, foreground, gave his budget message to the Legislature in 1993, state Sen. Allan Spear, left, listened with former House Speaker Dee Long. Spear, who died Saturday at age 71, was also chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

During 18 years of service on the Crime Prevention Committee, Spear expressed concern over the high rates of blacks in prison and fought against racial profiling.

Marcia Greenfield was a student of Spears' when he was an associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota. She joined him in the civil rights movement and later worked on his staff.

"He was intellectual and pro-

fessional in his approach to civil rights," she said, "but it was also part of his heart and soul."

He even went down to a black university to work on rights issues, she said. "Here's this short little Jewish boy from Michigan City, Indiana, and he goes down to Howard and throws himself into the civil rights movement," said Greenfield.

In 1974, Spear announced that he was gay, becoming one of the

first openly gay men serving as a state legislator in the country. He was a co-founder of the National Association of Gay & Lesbian Elected and Appointed Officials and a board member of the OutFront Minnesota PAC.

Before his historic announcement, Spear revealed his sexual orientation at elaborate dinners for friends. "He created a new course called 'Allan's coming-out course' before dessert," said Greenfield.

"He was mainly concerned about being type-cast," she said. "He didn't want to be a gay legislator, he wanted to be a legislator who was gay, who was Jewish, who was liberal."

Initially considered a "wide-eyed liberal professor" who once suggested that conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War receive bonuses like soldiers, he matured into a thoughtful and fair leader who demanded rigorous research on new bills, colleagues said.

But his views fit well with his constituents, and he won elections handily.

Beyond politics

Sen. Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis, who is also gay, replaced Spear when he retired. "Allan had a huge impact on my life, and the lives of many," said Dibble. "He was influential nationally on human rights issues. His contribution to the community cannot be overemphasized."

Spear made time away from academia and politics to enjoy travel and classical music — he was a board member of the Schubert Club.

He had heart surgery earlier this year, which later caused an infection, but not many knew about his health issues. "He wasn't very sentimental about that, and he didn't want people to fuss over him," Dibble said.

Spear is survived by Tsuji; a brother, Richard Spear of Washington, and many other family members.

Jon Tevlin • 612-673-1702