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Lauding the late Tom Lantos



Jennie S. Bev / For the Tracy Press / Tuesday, 12 February 2008

Jennie S. Bev mourns and celebrates the loss of a congressional crusader.

On Monday, California's 12th District congressman, Tom Lantos, died from esophageal cancer. He was 80. The San Mateo Democrat was diagnosed before the end of last year, but waited a month before revealing he was terminally ill. He was the only Holocaust survivor who served as a congressman.

My heart skipped a beat when I heard the news about his death. Lantos was the first congressman who accepted my husband and me with open arms when we moved to the Bay Area. He was one of the strongest supporters of our human rights activism. This strong defender of human rights possessed the aura of a prophet who, until his last days, did not even blink to support whenever there were causes that he believed in.

Last year, he made headlines when he scolded Yahoo during a congressional hearing over the jailing of a Chinese journalist because of this dot-com giant's cooperation with the Chinese government. Lantos spoke strongly, "Morally, you are pygmies."

That was my hero talking.

I recall how he was very concerned whenever I shared with him the human rights abuses occurring in Indonesia and other parts of the world. He would ask his assistant to call me on the phone whenever he was about to meet people whom he believed would be able to assist the causes I was advocating.

For this, he had won more than a friend, but a loyal admirer and a lifelong constituent — a mentee. As a new American, I was humbled by his generosity and belief in my minuscule activism. At heart, he represented much more than a great nation, he was a representation of a sincere humanitarian and one of the strongest moral forces in the world. For once, I was able to find a people's representative whose only politics was to make the world a better place to live.

After the news of his death, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, praised Lantos as "a bright light on the dark corners of oppression," who used his position in Congress to "empower the powerless and give a voice to the voiceless throughout the world."

Earlier this year, Lantos spoke to the media. "It is only in the United States that a penniless survivor of the Holocaust and a fighter in the anti-Nazi underground could have received an education, raised a family and had the privilege of serving the last three decades of his life as a member of Congress," he said. "I will never be able to express fully my profoundly felt gratitude to this great country."

I am going to miss Congressman Lantos — my friend, my mentor and my hero. His legacy of integrity, courage, humility and being the voice of the voiceless will stay with me throughout my lifetime. If someday I have the opportunity to serve like he did, he would be my role model, in heart and in mind. And these tears on my cheeks are not tears of grief, but tears of

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joy knowing that he is resting in heaven. I shall continue your legacy. Rest in peace.


• *Jennie S. Bev is a Town Crier columnist, a commentator and a college writing lecturer. She resides in Mountain House.*

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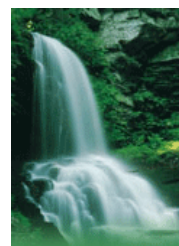
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