Senator Bill Raggio, 1926-2012
One of the state’s most important political figures passes away at age 85

Nevada State Sen. William “Bill” Raggio ’48 (political science), ’11HDG had a way of always eyeing the future and pushing his state toward its future, though he always did it through the scrim of the past.

He was the rare person who was as relevant and imposing in his 85th year as he had been half a century earlier.

When speaking, he could command a room in such a way that those who were scheduled to speak after his remarks did so at their own peril.

“I would shudder whenever I had to follow Bill,” said University President Emeritus Joe Crowley, following the news in late February that the 85-year-old Raggio, the longest-serving state senator in Nevada history, had passed away during a trip to Australia “No one could keep up with him in that area, or many others, for that matter.”

Raggio, a 1948 graduate of the University, served in the Nevada State Senate from 1972 into early 2011.

There were few others who had a greater or more profound impact on the state, most particularly in supporting higher education.

Crowley, a former political science professor at the University, said Raggio’s ability to embody the ideals of a different era in America, a time when politics were not so partisan, helped pave the way for the fourth-generation Nevadan’s success.

“Well, he’s legendary,” Crowley said, when asked to take stock of Raggio’s career and its impact. “I think the contributions that he made were in part due to his understanding of what, over the centuries, has helped make American politics productive in the long-term. There are times when we haven’t done this very well, and now is probably one of those times. But Bill had a very fundamental understanding that we are a nation and a state of tremendous diversity, in geography, religion, ethnicity, background. Therefore, the only way we can solve problems and meet challenges is to work together, and that involves meeting in the middle of the road.

“Bill had a very strong commitment to that. He was able to use his mastery of the legislative process to do that,” Crowley added. “He was a consensus-builder in every way: Check your personal enmities at the door and let’s sit down and do business. That was Bill’s way. That was how he got it done.”

What did he get done? The list is too long to enumerate, and Raggio, in his self-effacing, deadpan manner, would probably be embarrassed to have his many accomplishments named. Still, it bears noting that, among his accomplishments, he received the Distinguished Service Award from the University of Nevada, Reno Alumni Association in 1997; the Outstanding Alumnus award from the University of Nevada, Reno Alumni Associa-
tion in 1999; the Jake Lawlor Award from the University of Nevada Athletic Foundation in 1999; the President’s Medal from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2000; the Hero of Higher Education Award from the University of Nevada, Reno Faculty Senate and Nevada Faculty Alliance in 2011; and an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, awarded by the University of Nevada, Reno in 2011.

A permanent display devoted to Raggio is located on the first floor of the University’s William J. Raggio Building, the 118,000-square-foot building that houses the College of Education. It opened for classes in fall 1997 and was renamed in recognition of Sen. Raggio’s significant contributions to education in 2003. Within the building is the Raggio Research Center, which promotes research and programs to support science, technology, engineering and mathematics education.

University President Marc Johnson remembers the first time he met Raggio.

“He very much lived up to expectations,” Johnson said. “He really thought highly of higher education, and his alma mater. He was always willing to give counsel, to give advice, to share his perspective. Bill was incredibly wise.”

After serving in World War II, Raggio returned to his hometown of Reno and graduated from Nevada in 1948 with a degree in political science. He was on a fast track through the late 1950s and 1960s, first as an assistant Washoe County District Attorney under another towering figure in the history of northern Nevada, Jack Streeter, then as D.A. himself from 1958–70.

He moved up the ranks quickly, serving as the lead prosecutor in the murder of British Olympic skier Sonja McCaskie.

In 1972, Raggio was elected to the Nevada Senate, serving a record 38 years until his retirement early last year.

In February 2011, Raggio was honored by the Nevada Faculty Alliance and the Faculty Senate with “A Hero of Higher Education” award for his commitment and advocacy for higher education in Nevada. In April 2011, he established two scholarship endowments for Nevada students: the Senator William J. Raggio Education Scholarship Endowment and the Senator William J. Raggio Free Enterprise Scholarship Endowment. Both scholarships will be awarded for the first time in the 2012–13 school year.

Before his passing, Raggio had begun his appointment as a member of the University of Nevada, Reno Foundation Board of Trustees.

―John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A.

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