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Walter Capps dead at 63

Congressman suffers apparent heart attack at Washington airport

By Dave Wilcox
 Telegram-Tribune

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Rep. Walter Capps, a grandfatherly college professor who entered the rough-and-tumble world of politics three years ago, collapsed and died Tuesday evening leaving a plane near Washington, D.C.



The first-term Democrat apparently suffered a heart attack at Dulles International Airport, according to Lisa Finkel, the congressman's press secretary.

Capps, 63, was taken to Columbia Reston Hospital Center in nearby Reston, Va., according to The Associated Press. He was accompanied by his wife, Lois Capps.

The Santa Barbara congressman was returning to Washington from his district as the House prepared to vote on a defense authorization bill and other issues Tuesday afternoon.

Capps had attended the season-opening performance of the San Luis Obispo County Symphony on Saturday night at the Performing Arts Center, where he was introduced along with his wife.

The next morning, the couple attended St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Arroyo Grande.

Capps defeated Republican incumbent Andrea Seastrand last November in a rematch of their 1994 race, when Seastrand squeaked out a slim victory in Capps' first foray into elective politics. Capps won handily in 1996 following a bitter and expensive campaign for a seat coveted by national leaders of both parties.

Once in office, Capps spent his first year in the House focused primarily on education and human rights issues.

A scholar who authored 14 books, Capps unabashedly spoke of education as a balm for many of society's ills. "I think education is almost the answer to everything," he repeatedly said during his two campaigns.

Capps also spoke passionately of mending partisan wounds.

"I like to get people on both sides of an issue to agree to stay in the room and talk it out together. That's democratic government," he said last week during an interview with the Telegram-Tribune.

He embraced the ideal of a citizen-politician, and expressed a desire to return to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he spent 32 years as a religious studies professor.

Capps "brought constant values, a rare perspective and a sense of moral grounding that public life too often lacks, and will sorely miss," President Clinton said in a statement. Clinton made his final campaign stop in Santa Barbara last year to stump for Capps on the weekend before the election.

Two former colleagues of 22nd District Rep. Walter Capps were stunned to hear of his death.

Former White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, now a distinguished scholar at California State University Monterey Bay, called Capps' death a tragic loss for the district and the nation.

"I think he was one of the most decent and conscientious members of Congress," Panetta said. "Unfortunately, that quality of individual is the exception rather than the rule in Congress. He will be sorely missed."

"The last time I saw him was when I spoke at Cal Poly for graduation (in May)," Panetta said. "We talked about issues and the challenges of dealing with Congress. At that time, he seemed hopeful and very up."

Panetta added, "He felt, at that time, the right position would prevail. That was one of his great qualities."

Said Sen. Dianne Feinstein: "I was shocked and deeply saddened to learn of the tragic death. The House of Representatives and the people of California have lost a very special man. Walter served the people of his district with a thoughtfulness and forthrightness that is all too rare in Washington these days."

Feinstein added, "He measured his actions by whether or not they were true to his moral compass. We had dinner nearly three weeks ago and he vividly expressed to me how much he truly enjoyed representing the people of his district. He will be deeply missed."

Legislation pushed by Capps during his 10 months on Capitol Hill included bills to streamline Medicare payments for people suffering from Lou Gehrig's Disease and to secure funding for dredging Morro Bay. He also chastised the Clinton administration for refusing to sign a global treaty to ban land mines.

His years as a lecturer didn't transform Capps into a skilled orator on the stump, and at times he appeared painfully uncomfortable when trying to fire up supporters.

But the national exposure generated by his races against Seastrand wasn't entirely new to Capps.

An immensely popular class on the Vietnam War's impact that he created within the religious studies department at UC Santa Barbara in 1979 caught the attention of "60 Minutes," which featured the course during a segment. The class also helped Capps forge contacts with national political figures including Democratic Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, who was a featured lecturer at the

class.

Kerrey became a close friend and political confidant of Capps, a Nebraska native, and encouraged him to run against Seastrand in 1994. He lost the race by 1,600 votes.

"He showed people that a man can be decent and principled in the House. He will be sorely missed," Kerrey told The Associated Press. "He was just getting his sea legs in the House. But even if he had never passed any legislation, his spirit left a mark with us. He showed us how to live."

Capps joined the first group of American educators on a tour of Vietnam in 1991.

He was "one of the few people in the U.S. who spent an enormous amount of time on the Vietnam War after the Vietnam War," said Bob Mulholland, a Vietnam veteran who joined Capps and others in 1988 on a trip to Moscow.

"His devotion to students is probably what he should be remembered for."

Mulholland, who now serves as campaign adviser for the California Democratic Party, said Capps' decision to run for office demonstrated his interest in public service.

"While many are thinking of retiring, he decided to run for public office."

"I think as an educator and as a politician, he spoke with a different voice," said Marty Stone, who Capps defeated in the 1994 Democratic primary.

Stone, now western political director for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, had Capps as a professor while attending UCSB.

"He was not a typical professor, and that's why he was so popular."

Lanky with a hunched gait, Capps was surprisingly athletic. He tossed a football to aides while walking precincts and always kept a baseball glove in the trunk of his car in case there was a chance for a game of catch.

In recent years, however, Capps had to battle back from health problems.

He suffered a scare in March 1996 when he fainted in the lobby of the KVEC radio station. Paramedics rushed him to French Hospital Medical Center, where he was hospitalized overnight.

A doctor blamed his collapse on an erratic heartbeat, which returned to normal without treatment. There was no evidence of heart disease, according to the physician.

His brother, Doug Capps, said at the time that Walter was evaluated by doctors in 1989 after suffering a similar fainting spell and has had an irregular heartbeat most of his life.

Two months later, Capps nearly died in a May 1996 car crash caused by a drunken driver that kept him from campaigning for most of the summer.

He was forced to spend the better part of three months in physical therapy rehabilitating after breaking an arm and a leg in the crash. By August, he was getting around without crutches or a cane and was again scheduling occasional campaign stops.

Despite the setbacks, Capps, who never held office, garnered 102,915 votes to Seastrand's 90,374 in the 22nd Congressional District race in November.

It was a much different result than in 1994, when Capps -- virtually unknown in San Luis Obispo County prior to his candidacy -- lost to Seastrand by less than 1 percent of the vote in a contest that contained far less mudslinging than the repeat campaign.

In 1996, Seastrand lost points with many voters with relentless, negative television ads. The most controversial depicted Capps, who opposes the death penalty, next to Richard Allen Davis, the convicted killer of 12-year-old Polly Klaas.

Only two people were disappointed by Allen's recent death sentence, the ad said: Davis himself and Capps. Capps didn't counterattack, although ads critical of Seastrand were aired by labor unions and environmentalists.

Capps credited his Middle America roots with providing the values that later guided him.

He was the oldest of four brothers who grew up in a tight-knit family in Omaha.

Capps graduated from Portland State University, then spent the next few years training for the seminary. He earned a master's degree and doctorate from Yale and a degree from Yale Divinity School.

He arrived in Santa Barbara in 1964 to establish a religious studies department at UCSB.

Capps was 29, married, and his wife was expecting the first of their three children.

Family and education were touchstones for Capps. His three brothers all earned advanced degrees and stayed close through their adult lives.

His brother, Doug, was Walter's campaign manager during the 1996 race.

"I often thought of our parents," Capps said last year a couple of weeks before the election, "how pleased they would be to see their oldest son and youngest son working side-by-side."

Congressional staffers said Capps' body would be flown back to California. No funeral arrangements were announced.

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