

FROM: The Times of Huntington

Astute and empathetic advocate for veterans, seniors

Suffolk County Legislator Steven Stern: Man of the Year in Government

by Patricia Proven

December 30, 2010

The Times of Huntington honors Suffolk County Legislator Steve Stern (D-Dix Hills) as Man of the Year in Government for promoting a culture of government responsibility and responsiveness, and for pioneering legislation that will improve and protect the lives of vulnerable veterans and their families, senior citizens and children.

Stern's ideas come as much from listening to community needs and collaborating with advocacy groups as from his own attention to gaps in service and important matters of the day. As a result, he has produced some groundbreaking legislation that other lawmakers across New York and other states have been quick to follow.

In March 2009, Stern led Suffolk's ban the sale of bisphenol A (BPA) from baby bottles and drinking cups intended for children 3 years or younger.

"One of the best coups not only of the decade but also of my lifetime," said Karen Joy Miller of the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition, "has been in the banning of BPA, a known endocrine disrupter that affects the most vulnerable: children, pregnant women, people with compromised immune systems and the elderly. By eliminating their pervasive use in products, we're on the track to reducing incidents of diseases. When, under the leadership of Steven Stern, the Legislature passed this bill unanimously, it really caused a whole national change. I want to call it a domino effect."

Laura Weinberg, president of the Great Neck Breast Cancer Coalition, said of Stern, "I think that he has the courage to make real change and that he is a special leader, that he is not satisfied with the status quo. He wants to make a difference and was exemplary in ... trying to get BPA banned in products for children under 3 years old and such a huge example for the entire country."

Stern's advocacy has also made an impact on veterans not only in his district but countywide.

His "crowning achievement" by many accounts was his 2010 legislation, which the Legislature passed unanimously in June, to bar protests and demonstrations outside military funerals. "It meant a lot to all of us," American Legion Greenlawn Post 1244 Commander Bob Santo, of Huntington Station, said. He and 2nd Vice Commander Dennis Giunta of Greenlawn said they just hope a pending court decision doesn't undercut the county legislation. The Supreme Court is hearing the case of Albert Snyder; he sued Westboro Baptist Church for its vitriolic demonstration outside the funeral of his son, Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, who died in 2006 while serving in Iraq. According to published reports, Snyder won a \$5 million settlement against the church but a federal appeals court in Richmond, Va., threw out the penalty, citing the group's First Amendment rights of free speech.

"Veterans all over the country are outraged," Santo said.

Many people in Suffolk, including Stern, share that outrage, especially after the Topeka, Kan., church in September 2009 brought a message of bigotry and hate outside Temple Beth El in Huntington following a memorial service held there for Yale murder victim Annie Le. Her then-fiancé is from Huntington.

Giunta, a member of the Patriot Guard Riders group that shields soldiers' families from harassment at funerals, said when Stern found out about Westboro's protests across the country, "he was totally appalled, he couldn't believe it."

Stern's wife, Meredith, added, "There was a lot of press from other states before it even was a local issue. He watches a tremendous amount of news — local and federal — and he would bring that up to me how shocking that was."

So, when a Long Island family's son died in the service, "that became his top priority — to get that signed before the funeral," she said.

Perhaps written with the potential for legal challenges in mind, the legislation does not altogether ban protests but prohibits them within 300 feet of a cemetery or 150 feet of a church or mortuary an hour before or after funeral services are being held.

Giunta said, "[Stern] was very instrumental in getting that through the Legislature and getting [County Executive Steve] Levy to sign it." After it was signed, the Patriot Guard Riders, Giunta included, accompanied the document to Riverhead where it went on record with the clerk. "We were the messengers," he said.



Veterans seem to generally find Stern responsive to their needs and concerns.

He has secured county grant money for food to the Salvation Army Veterans Residence at the Northport VA, Dr. Ray Mascolo of East Northport said. Stern also got county approval for a restoration of Elwood's historic schoolhouse so community groups like the Greenlawn American Legion could have a meeting place, Santo and Giunta said.

Santo said that where most government officials have distant relationships with the community, Stern is different: "He was great and his entire staff is very responsive. If you're in the neighborhood, drop in — it's that nice. ... If Steve's not around, his staff is just great."

Remarking on what it was like working with Stern, Giunta said, "He's been a very straightforward, up-front guy. He's always been willing to listen to the veterans, along with [Rep.] Steve Israel (D-Dix Hills), if you have any questions on what the county provides for veterans."

Mascolo oversees a program by which Gold Star families — those whose loved ones have died in service — may visit residents of the Northport VA. Stern came down in November, he recalled, and helped cook for the residents, serve them and talk with them to see what they need. "The veterans are very thankful to have him come," Mascolo said. "He's a sweetheart, a decent human being. All the guys that I'm friends with are nice guys, Republican and Democrat. I think he has a genuine concern to help people."

Stern also pays close attention to the needs of senior citizens.

According to Mary Ann Ragona, executive director of Alzheimer's Association Long Island, Stern had seen Silver Alert working in Florida and decided Long Island needed one, too. It was he who sponsored Suffolk's 2009 bill for a Silver Alert program, which became the first in New York State. The alerts connect law enforcement and media when elders with Alzheimer's or dementia go missing.

"Close to 70 percent of folks with Alzheimer's will wander during some point in the disease process," said Ragona, who testified on the need for the program. "These folks have a tendency to cross county lines."

Six months after Suffolk passed the bill, Nassau County followed and, as a result, Ragona said, advocates were able to convince Rockland County. Silver Alert also recently passed in NYC.

Remarking on Stern's attention to such matters, she said, "He's always there, very loyal. He's latched onto this and he's realized that seniors are a very vulnerable population and they're overlooked."

Stern, a certified elder law attorney, began to show concern for seniors early on. "In college he was involved in those issues," said Meredith, who met her husband of 17 years at Tulane University in New Orleans, where he was a political science major. During one summer, she recalled, "he went to Washington ... he was an intern for the local congressman from his home district" where he grew up, in Holbrook. "One of the [federal] legislations he was working on in college was elder abuse, which was horrifying to him, especially coming from such a close family," including his parents, a brother and a sister. "In law school, he became involved with an elder clinic for senior citizens who couldn't afford legal counsel."

As for his good rapport with the community, Meredith said, "I know that responding to the inquiries in his office is a top priority; he gets a lot of letters where no one will help or even make the attempt; he takes a lot of pride in that and gets compliments to he and staff for responsiveness."

Miller agreed, saying, "If I don't call Steve — and I know he does this to all community groups that work on one issue or another — he'll call you and want to find out: what are you doing, what are your needs. He comes in with his own yellow pad."

While advocacy groups usually must present a full plan to legislators and keep the communication going, Miller said when you leave a meeting with Stern, the response time is very short. "He'll come back and he'll think about what problems you have presented," she said, "about what resources he has that can help. We can come up with a solution but basically ... he focuses on the program and thinks about what he can offer as part of the solution."

Stern and Meredith have two children, Harrison, 11, and Jayson, 8, and it seems they are just as thrilled as the community is with this family oriented man. "I think he's wonderful," Meredith said. "I'm just so proud of him. I've known him since he's 21 years old. He's always had an amazing heart and he's always been very empathetic. I'm very proud to have him as my husband and my legislator."