Remembering a Pioneering Politician

Edward Brooke, first black US senator since Reconstruction and BU alum, has died

A decade ago, at a ceremony celebrating the donation of his papers to BU’s Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Brooke gave his alma mater a shout-out for its devotion to public service. LAW Dean Maureen O’Rourke recalled the moment on her blog the day Brooke died:

“I was the Interim Dean then and sat in the back, awed by the occasion and his presence. Imagine my shock when in the middle of his speech, he recognized me after reading an article in the Boston Globe about BU LAW’s increasing its loan repayment assistance endowment by $500,000. He emphasized the importance of public service and was proud of his alma mater’s legacy and ongoing commitment.”

The future dean befriended the former senator and attended the 2009 ceremony at which President Obama presented Brooke the Congressional Gold Medal. (Five years earlier, he’d received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country’s highest civilian honor.)

“I loved visiting the Senator and his wife, Anne, at their home in Miami,” O’Rourke wrote. “It was humbling to see the memorabilia associated with a life of public service and to talk about current issues and hear the Senator’s perspective.”

Brooke’s “quiet and substantial generosity” to LAW reflected his “commitment to the public good,” says Scott Nichols, BU’s senior vice president for development and alumni relations. “He was inspirational in so many ways, including as a philanthropist.”

“He was very much like a fourth brother to me,” says Harriet Elam-Thomas, a career diplomat and former ambassador to Senegal. Two of her actual brothers were close to Brooke: Harry (CAS’48, LAW’51) knew him at BU, and Clarence served with Brooke in the Army during World War II in Italy.

“He called me every year on my birthday,” Elam-Thomas says. “He came to my wedding. He came to my swearing-in when I became ambassador.” Now 73, she recalls the sexism in the diplomatic corps—“wearing a skirt in the Foreign Service was 10 times more difficult than being brown-skinned”—but always got encouragement from her “big brothers,” a group that included Brooke.

“They pushed me to excel, and he was right there with them,” says Elam-Thomas. After his time at the School of Law, where he edited the law review, he opened a law office in Roxbury. In 1962, the Republican Brooke was elected Massachusetts’ attorney general—the nation’s first black AG.

Brooke parlayed his prosecution of corrupt politicians and his oversight of the hunt for the Boston Strangler into his landslide Senate victory in 1966. Serving two terms, he made his mark on civil rights legislation, sponsoring open housing and public housing rent cap laws.

But a bitter divorce and the revelation that he’d made a false financial statement in a deposition related to it persuaded voters to replace him with Paul Tsongas in 1978. After his defeat, Brooke joined a Washington, D.C., law firm and bought a farm in Virginia, later moving to Florida.

“Senator Brooke was a transcendent figure in our state and in the nation,” says Boston University President Robert A. Brown. “He was first or in the vanguard in many things, but the firsts were not the full measure of his career and his impact as a legislator and attorney general. We are proud to claim this principled public servant and decorated veteran as an alumnus of Boston University’s School of Law and former member of our board of trustees. We are saddened at his death.”

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