

Remarks of Mayor Noam Bramson
In Memory of Council Member James C. Stowe
August 10, 2010

To Roxie and Tobhnas and Eipporah: Thank you for permitting us to join today in honoring the life and memory of your husband and your father. And thank you for the gift of Jim's service to our community.

Others today will recall Jim from the intimate perspective of family or long friendship. My duty and my privilege is to speak of Jim Stowe the public man, the politician.

Except that Jim Stowe was not a politician.

Now, don't misunderstand me. He knew the political process as well as anyone . . . and excelled at it. He won election twice, each time by a landslide. And he played a key role in dozens more campaigns, from New Rochelle all the way up to the Presidency.

In social settings, he had a playful charm that any politician would envy: easy to engage, quick to laugh, never too proud to poke fun at himself.

He was seemingly able to place a campaign lawn sign on every single property in Rochelle Heights, a feat that has never and will never be equaled.

Most of all, he had a natural talent for making connections and inspiring loyalty. For those who needed a mentor or just a helping hand, there was no one more generous with his time or tender in his manner.

But if being a politician also means conforming to the role of an insider or engaging in the habits of back-slapping and mutual congratulation that are aimed mainly at massaging the egos of others in government and making everyone in the club look good . . . then Jim Stowe didn't want any part of it.

Because when it came to the essential work of building a community in which all people have a voice and a stake, when it came to the work of doing right by those who trusted and depended upon him, Jim Stowe was not interested in getting along for the sake of getting along.

He didn't care about the approval of public officials. He cared about the lives of the public.

And he didn't think anyone should be comfortable in the face of conditions that demand outrage or action.

Perhaps it would have been otherwise if his own life had been different. If he had not been the product of a still divided and segregated era, if he had not achieved his pioneering professional success only by surmounting obstacles, if he had not watched the talents and abilities of others needlessly discarded . . .

If he had not seen firsthand the power of law and policy to lift people up . . . or to tear people

down.

But that was his life. And it is a mark of Jim's character and strength of purpose that he never despaired or retreated, and instead drew from such experiences a relentless drive to make things better.

This motive and no other is why, seven years ago, he accepted the draft of his neighbors and gave up a well-earned retirement to assume the responsibilities and burdens of elected office.

So if, around the Council table, Jim could be a little tough (every now and then a lot tough), it's because he was impelled by a sense of urgency that did not permit any waste of time or effort on the happy talk and euphemisms in which injustices are too often packaged.

He spoke plainly, directly and fearlessly, knowing that sometimes tension is a small price to pay to shake up the instruments of government . . . and move them towards service of the common good.

Jim Stowe was not a politician. He was a leader.

And we in New Rochelle, the adopted city he came to know and love and serve in so many ways, the adopted city whose virtues and potential he perceived perhaps more clearly than our native-born – we in New Rochelle are now, together, all of us, the beneficiaries of his restless work.

I think of everything that he did to elevate affordable housing to a first-rank priority. I think of his personal role in creating new opportunities for young people to acquire skills. I think of his determination to nurture talent within our government and create paths for upward mobility for those who proved deserving. I think of his tireless engagement with builders to ensure that development was linked to training and job creation.

I think of his fierce advocacy for a district that he called the “lungs of New Rochelle,” and in which he saw both strength and challenge in equal measures. And I think of the steady voice of experience and common-sense that he applied to all of the major challenges and debates that shape New Rochelle, never intimidated by controversy or political risk.

And this is only one portion of his outsized role in our city. Some knew Jim as the founder of New Rochelle's Lego League, or as a steward of public housing, or as a devoted gardener at Ward Acres, or as the champion of the historic district.

Many more knew Jim as a humble man, who saw no task as beneath him, so long as it served a purpose in which he believed. And who tended the needs of his neighbors with the same care that he applied to every bush and flower and vine so lovingly kept at his and Roxie's home.

All of this was Jim Stowe.

Whatever public honors we bestow today or in the days to come, they will never compare to the lives he transformed. The families who own their first home. The students with a brighter future. The workers better able to find security and opportunity. The youngsters who stood up a little straighter in the presence of a strong and determined man. It is these lives that will be the true monument to Jim Stowe's deeds, and the only reward for which he would ever hope.

Those of us who served with Jim as colleagues with miss him greatly. We can imagine him now, in the world beyond our own, already scoffing at the notion of heavenly perfection and pointedly addressing what he liked to call “opportunities for improvement.” And, take it from me and the other Council Members, the Almighty had better not interrupt while Jim Stowe has the floor.

May Jim Stowe’s memory guide our labors together and may we take up with renewed passion the cause of the better city and world to which, until his last day, Jim devoted himself.

Thank you.