

R.E. Van Norstrand Dies

Ex-speaker Of State House

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R. E. Van Norstrand, a Republican who served as speaker of the state House of Representatives in the mid-1980s, died Sunday. He was 57.

He suffered from a lung ailment, friends said.

Mr. Van Norstrand was remembered by former colleagues Sunday as a quiet intellectual with a dry sense of humor.

"He was one of the smartest people I have ever known," former state Rep. Robert Jaekle of Stratford said. "He was a tremendous intellect within the legislature."

Jaekle served as an assistant minority leader under Mr. Van Norstrand from 1978 to 1985, when Jaekle became majority leader. He said Mr. Van Norstrand's low-key manner could be mistaken by some as a lack of people skills.

"He was a very matter-of-fact person," Jaekle said. "Where others might be schmoozers or glad-handers, he told the same story no matter who he was telling it to."

State Rep. Richard O. Belden, R-Shelton, said Mr. Van Norstrand was a "complex person," a private person who dedicated much of his life to serving in highly visible public offices.

"I always found him to be very caring and concerned about others," said Belden, who served as deputy house speaker in 1985 and 1986. "We never had a cross word between us all the time we worked so closely together."

Mr. Van Norstrand was simply called "Van" by those who knew him and served with him in the legislature.

"He had a very dry sense of humor," Belden said. "You had to listen to him very closely."

"He was a very quick wit," Jaekle said. "He liked to play sports trivia games."

Belden said Mr. Van Norstrand's accomplishments in public [service](#) may go unnoticed because of his unassuming manner.

"The public will not realize his contributions, but they were significant in his own quiet, earnest way."

Mr. Van Norstrand was elected to the 141st House District in 1976 in a special [election](#) to serve an unexpired term. He was re-elected in November 1976 and served until 1986, when he decided not to seek re-election. He served as House minority leader for three terms and was elected speaker of the House in 1985.

That term was the last time Republicans controlled the state House of Representatives until this year.

Mr. Van Norstrand began government service in 1965 as a member of the Darien Representative Town Meeting and served on that body and the town's sewer authority until 1973, when he was elected selectman. He continued to serve as a selectman until 1976.

Mr. Van Norstrand had been active in Young Republican activities and was a former president and treasurer of the Darien Young Republicans. He also served on numerous campaign committees and was active as a local coordinator for a number of candidates.

He was an attorney with the Norwalk law firm of Slavitt, Connery and Vardamis. He was chairman of the state Ethics Committee and a member of the Commission on Compensation of Elected Officials at the time of his death.

He was a past member of the board of stewards of the First Congregational Church of Darien, a former member of the board of directors of the Darien Library Inc., and a former director of the Darien Chamber of Commerce. He was also a member of the Stamford-Darien Bar Association and the Connecticut Bar Association, where he served on the committee on professional ethics.

Born Jan. 13, 1937, in Westfield, Mass., Mr. Van Norstrand was the son of the late Ralph Ellis and Charlotte Hennessey Van Norstrand.

Mr. Van Norstrand attended the Manlius School in Manlius, N.Y., Harvard College, and was a 1958 magna cum laude graduate of the University of Connecticut. He was a 1961 graduate of Yale Law School.

Mr. Van Norstrand is survived by his wife, Loretta Van Norstrand of Darien; a son, R. E. Van Norstrand III of New Canaan; two daughters, Brook Van Norstrand of Rochester, N.Y., and Merrylea Van Norstrand of Darien; and two stepdaughters, Kristin Fresch of Seattle and Sara Faye Story of Darien.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at the First Congregational Church of Darien, 14 Brookside Road, Darien.

There are no calling hours.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that memorial contributions be made to the Film Room of the Darien Library Inc., 35 Leroy Ave., Darien.