

MEMORIAL TRIBUTE



WALTER T. WITTMAN

April 19, 1914 - August 1, 1994



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TO

WALTER T. WITTMAN

Dignity, honesty, and intelligence are words that come to mind when friends think of Walter T. Wittman.

His intellectual curiosity, his love for life and his adroit humor were always concentrated on the big picture of what was important to him in this world and he expended no energy on the mean, petty, irrelevant or trivial. Eloquent, generous and well-read, he charmed everyone and gave all -- no matter how inexperienced or inarticulate -- the benefit of the doubt.

Walter was born in Dresden, Germany in 1914, the son of Carl Wittman and Mary Thalmayr Wittman. Walter's great love for adventure may have been inherited from "Pop" Wittman who, before his marriage to Mary, embarked on a round the world trip as a ship's baker and landed in Alaska where, while panning gold in the Klondike Rush, he became an American citizen.

The Wittmans came to Paramus in 1922 when it was just being created as a separate Borough out of Midland Township. Walter and his brother, Robert, were raised there. Pop was a constant advocate of socialist causes in the German language newspapers of New York. He began farming in Paramus and edited and published the Fair Lawn and Paramus Clarion for nearly thirty years.

Walter greatly admired his father's keen observations, socialist values and clear communication skills. In his own later years, Walter began translating his father's German correspondence, demanding information about Pop from the Justice Department of the "Palmer raid" era, and compiling information for a book about his father.

In 1931, after his graduation from Hackensack High School, Walter began commuting -- by trolley and the 125th Street ferry -- to Columbia College. It was there that he soon found his love and life partner of sixty-one years in Jeannette Freeman. After his graduation from college, Walt and Jeannette stayed in New York where Jeannette, leaving her studies at Barnard, supported the family while Walter worked and studied law at Columbia Law School.

After Walter's graduation in 1938, Walter and Jeanette came back to Paramus where they first lived in a rented house on Spring Valley Road and later moved to the house they had designed and constructed for them on Century Road. It was in this house, which they both loved, that Walter and Jeannette spent the rest of their lives and raised children, Jane and Carl.

In 1939, Walter began his service to his community as the Judge of the Recorder's Court. In the same year he was appointed as the attorney for the Paramus Board of Education, a post he held for 32 years. From 1940 to 1954 he was also the Borough Attorney for Paramus and was the draftsman of the first Paramus zoning ordinance. He was active, both as an attorney and a participant, in many community organizations in Paramus. He was a charter

member of the Paramus Rotary Club and its second president, founding counsel of the Paramus Volunteer Ambulance Corps, a member of the Paramus School Service Association and a Friend of the Paramus Library.

His unbridled energy led him to become recognized throughout the State as an expert in municipal and school law. He was the Borough Attorney of Hillsdale -- appointed both by Republicans and Democrats -- from 1956 to 1979 and the attorney for many other planning boards, zoning boards and boards of education in Bergen County. He helped draft both the Municipal Planning Act of 1953 and its successor, the Municipal Land Use Law of 1976. He was a Consultant to the State, County and Municipal Government Commission for Drafting of the County Optional Charter Law in 1972-73 and was elected to the Bergen County Optional Charter Commission in 1973. He was a founding member of the New Jersey Association of School Attorneys and the New Jersey Institute of Municipal Attorneys. At the time of his death, he was the Co-Chair of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, Legislative Committee.

While his skills as a municipal and school lawyer provided a good living for his family, his activities in the service of humankind were often more rewarding to him on a personal level. He generously gave his time and skills to activism in anti-fascist causes in Spain, civil rights in Mississippi, draft counselling during the Vietnam War, peace and social justice causes in Latin America and around the world.

As early as 1944, Walter began publicly attacking racial

discrimination. As the attorney for the Bergen County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he brought a successful action against the Esquire Restaurant in Hackensack for refusing to serve an African-American woman. He was hailed on that occasion by William A. Caldwell, noted columnist for the Bergen Evening Record, of Hackensack, as "one of the few lawyers in Bergen County who knows which way the clock turns."

In 1948, he was instrumental in the first challenge to the systematic exclusion of African-Americans from the grand jury in Bergen County and was involved in a second challenge in 1969 that resulted in a modification of the grand jury selection process.

He frequently served, pro bono, as the attorney for many members of minority communities in Bergen County and to the Bergen County Fair Housing Council. In 1964, he spent a summer in Mississippi using his legal skills to gather evidence for local lawyers challenging the arbitrary and racially discriminatory actions of local election officials.

As a champion of the Bill of Rights, he counseled his board of education clients -- under the First Amendment's "establishment clause" -- to maintain the wall of separation between church and state, even at the risk of personal public vilification. Yet, in the true tradition of the First Amendment -- which also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion -- he aided many church clients, such as the Mount Zion Baptist Church of Lodi, Congregation Beth Aron of Teaneck and the Hanil Korean Presbyterian

Church, in establishing their places of worship in the face of local opposition.

Early on, as a member of Governor William T. Cahill's Housing Task Force in 1971-72, he recognized the inequities of suburban exclusionary zoning and its impact on the ability of people to obtain affordable housing. He challenged his municipal clients to attack the real property tax system in New Jersey as one of the root causes of the State's housing shortage. . As attorney for the Englewood Board of Education, amicus curiae before the New Jersey Supreme Court, in the landmark case of Robinson v. Cahill he challenged that same tax system as the cause of inequitable education funding.

Before the adoption of the Open Public Meetings Act, Wittman in 1963 established, in the case of Wolf v. Zoning Board of Adjustment of Park Ridge, the principle that municipal bodies were required to take formal actions only at open, public meetings. As a continued advocate of openness in government, he counseled the sponsors of the Open Public Meetings Act during the legislative process leading to the adoption of that law.

Following his father's lead, he became a world traveller and an astute observer of the human race. He and Jeannette travelled to 87 countries in the world, sometimes with daughter, Jane, and friend, Jo Komow. He was always

willing to share his excellent photographs and slides of his travels along with knowledgeable discussions of what he and Jeannette had seen.

Walter's love of the outdoors led to many adventures. He took his children on camping-kayak trips on whitewater and, like a coxswain, urged them to be "strong, powerful, strong, powerful." At age 49, he learned downhill skiing (breaking both legs on separate occasions) and, later, he was proud of the fact that was a member of the "Over 70 Club" at many ski areas. At about 60 he began sailing, first with a Laser and then his "mistresses", the Melody and the Cynara on Greenwood Lake and the Hudson River. Two weeks before his death he visited the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park.

He and Jeannette loved the theater and Walter could often be found "conducting" WQXR on his car radio. A frustrated, would-be musician in his soul, he loved and appreciated the world's fine music in the classical, baroque, blues, international and folk genres.

All of these experiences and his awesome memory made him a consummate story teller. At breakfast -- which never took less than an hour in the Wittman household -- at lunch, over drinks or at dinner, Walter would sit in discussion for hours with family and friends challenged by, and challenging, their thoughts on art, politics, philosophy,

the natural world, inspired by the writings of Shakespeare, Brecht, Gould, Marx, Fugard, Hawking and Galbraith to name but a few.

Beyond being a generous and loving father, he was a friend to his children, Jane and Carl. As with his friends and colleagues of all ages, a lively "family culture" developed around their shared insights. Walter is survived only by his daughter, Jane Van De Bogart. His beloved Jeannette died 4 months, to the day, before Walter, and his son, Carl, a Renaissance dance scholar, died in 1986 of AIDS.

Spoken tributes were offered at a memorial gathering at the Central Unitarian Church in Paramus on August 20, 1994 by his long-time colleague, Thomas W. Dunn; friends, Ed Brodtkin and Marya Warshaw-Chu; fellow sailor and celestial navigation mentor, Jack Coan; and Harvard professor and author, Stephen Jay Gould.

Among Walter's favorite charities are the Paramus Rotary Club Foundation, c/o Thomas Wells, P.O.Box 1827, Paramus, NJ 07653 and the Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Avenue, P.O.Box 548, Montgomery, AL 36101.



"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. That struggle might be a moral one; it might be a physical one; it might be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. People might not get all that they work for in this world, but they must certainly work for all they get."

*Frederick Douglass
Abolitionist*