

# State Rep. Darlene Luther dies at 54

By Robert Whereatt  
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State Rep. Darlene Luther, a DFLer representing the Brooklyn Park area since 1993 and the wife of U.S. Rep. Bill Luther, died of cancer Wednesday night.



Darlene Luther had stomach cancer.

Luther, 54, died at 10:40 p.m. at her home, surrounded by her family, said a statement by the Minnesota House.

In November, Luther disclosed that she had stomach cancer and was undergoing chemotherapy.

"Darlene was a beautiful person in every sense of the word," Bill Luther said Thursday in a statement.

**LUTHER continues on A15:**  
— She lost her first campaign but then won five in a row.

## *She, husband briefly served together in state Legislature*

"Her unpretentious and friendly nature was a joy to all who knew her. She was generous beyond belief, and she truly loved her family, friends and constituents. We had 34 terrific years together," the congressman said.

The Luthers briefly served together in the Legislature in the early 1990s, becoming the first husband-and-wife team to represent the same area simultaneously. Bill Luther was in the state Senate. The Democrat was elected to Congress in 1994, representing the Sixth District.

Darlene Luther first ran for the House in a 1991 special election. Her Republican opponent, Rich Krambeer, portrayed her husband as the kingpin of a suburban political machine who was helping his wife add to the machine's power.

"I'm an independent person," she told the Star Tribune in an interview at the time. "I have my own program for crime and health care and equity funding. . . . I go to him [her husband] because he has an expertise, but politics have been part of my life for 19 years, so I know how campaigns are run."

She lost. Undaunted, she ran again in the 1992 general election against Krambeer and won, and was reelected four times.

Condolences and remembrances poured in from those close to her in public and private life.

"She just fascinated me because she took an interest in you," said the Rev. Lonnie Titus, House chaplain for the past three years.

"She was always there for the [opening House] prayer, and she always gave direct eye contact and always gave a gesture of appreciation. Often she would come up and say, 'That prayer meant a lot to me. Thank you.' She'd go out of her

way."

Titus recently said he called Luther to chat and inquire about her health.

"She said, right in the middle of the conversation, 'Chaplain, I would like it very much if you would say some words at my funeral.' It kind of threw me off; I didn't want to be talking funerals in that conversation. . . . I said, 'Darlene, I would be honored to.'"

In 1998, Luther had a liver transplant and became a passionate advocate for organ donation education.

In the 2000 legislative session, she secured \$135,000 to fund a mobile unit that would travel the state to increase education and awareness of organ, tissue and eye donations. That appropriation, however, was vetoed by Gov. Jesse Ventura.

In 1999, LifeSource, the organ donation procurement organization for the Midwest region, gave Luther its "outstanding supporter" award for her work on organ donation.

Luther also pushed legislation to help physically and mentally challenged people live independently. The Luthers have a son with Down syndrome who is employed at a law firm.

She also worked on legislation that required landlords who own multiple units to provide renters with written leases. It was an important issue in her district, which has a large number of rental units.

### **'Enormous empathy'**

Phil Carruthers, a friend and former DFL House speaker from Brooklyn Center, remembered Luther as a "very warm and caring person, a little shy, kind of self-deprecating. She was never impressed with herself that she was a legislator. She treated everybody well, and had good dealings with constituents and average citizens. . . . She was more of a one-to-one person. That's how she communicated with peo-

ple."

As a legislator, "she cared passionately about education, early childhood issues and health care. Of course, when she had her transplant, she was a terrific resource for the Legislature in ways to encourage people to be donors," said Carruthers, now an assistant Ramsey County attorney.

Luther worked as a substitute teacher in the Osseo School District, in addition to her legislative duties.

She did volunteer work for children with special needs and helped raise money for the Special Olympics.

"She had enormous empathy for those less fortunate," said U.S. Rep. Gil Gutknecht, R-Minn. "I cannot imagine the pain of losing her."

Rep. Thomas Bakk, DFL-Cook, said Luther will be "sadly missed by her constituency because she did a very good job of representing their interests and took that job very seriously."

Ventura ordered state flags flown at half-staff in Luther's honor. "She was a tireless worker here at the Capitol," he said in a statement. "She will surely be missed."

Luther was born in Cloquet, Minn., in 1947. She graduated from White Bear Lake High School and the University of St. Thomas, where she earned a bachelor of arts degree in business administration.

She was a Northwest Airlines flight attendant for 17 years.

She and the congressman have two children, Alex, 24, and Alicia, 20.

Visitation is 4 to 8 p.m. Monday at O'Halloran & Murphy Funeral Home, 575 Snelling Av. S., St. Paul. Services will be held at 11 a.m. Tuesday at the St. Paul Cathedral. The family requested that cards and letters be sent to 1399 Geneva Av. N., Suite 202, Oakdale, MN 55128 and that memorials be sent to the Gift of Life Transplant House, 705 SW. 2nd St., Rochester, MN 55902.

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