

Reflections

The 2002 Legislative Session began on a somber note Jan. 29 due to the death of one member, and because of the serious illness of another.

An empty seat in the Senate chamber once belonged to Sen. Sam Solon (DFL-Duluth) who died Dec. 28. Over in the House chamber, a single red rose was placed on the desk of Rep. Darlene Luther (DFL-Brooklyn Park) by her long-time friend and neighbor, Sen. Linda Scheid (DFL-Brooklyn Park).

Luther, who had already survived a liver transplant, was seriously ill again. She died the next evening.

Since 1971 more than a dozen legislators died in office while serving their constituents.

One of the most colorful was Rep. James Rice (DFL-Mpls.).

Rice, who served in the House for 26 years, died in his fifth floor office in the State Office Building in 1996. He was noted for his literary soliloquies in the chamber, and when he spoke, the normally noisy chamber would become very quiet while everyone listened.

Each of these legislators shared a common thread of dedication, passion, and vision. Although Rep. Gloria Segal (DFL-St. Louis Park) resigned one month before her term ended in January 1993 because of ill health, she died shortly thereafter. Her dedication and passion was directed toward fighting for the human rights of all people.

More recently, House members who left a never-forgotten memory in the chamber and around the Capitol were Rep. Ken Otremba (DFL-Long Prairie) and Rep. Barb Vickerman (R-Redwood Falls), who

both died in 1997, and "Mr. Environment" Rep. Willard Munger (DFL-Duluth), who passed away in 1999.

In the previous two decades three House members died in office: Rep. Charlie Miller (DFL-Wabasha) in 1971, Rep. Ben Omann (IR-St. Joseph) in 1986, and Rep. John Rose (IR-Roseville) in 1988.

Rose is still remembered as a community activist in his hometown, and by more tenured members and staff in the House as the seer "Carnac the Magnificent."



PHOTO BY ANDREW VON BANK

Legislators and staff sign the registry in the St. Paul Cathedral at the Feb. 5 funeral of Rep. Darlene Luther.

On the last night at the end of a legislative session, Rose would dress in a cape and turban — not unlike former television host Johnny Carson — then make predictions about Minnesota's future from the well of the chamber.

In addition to Solon, senators who died in office, include Sen. Bob Lewis (DFL-St. Louis Park) in 1979. In 1972, Lewis and Rep. Ray Pleasant (IR-Bloomington) were the first African-Americans to be elected to the Legislature since J. Francis Wheaton (R-Edina) in 1898.

Other senators dying in office during the past 30 years are Sen. Eugene Stokowski (DFL-Mpls.) in 1979, Sen. Ed Schrom (DFL-Albany) in 1980, and Sen. Janet Johnson (DFL-North Branch) in 1999.

Our lives are reflective of the transitions and the choices that we make while we live them. As people pass in and out of our lives, we have the choice to take on the positives of those who pass on. By embracing those attributes, individually we may hope to build our own strength, dedication, commitment, and vision.

—LECLAIR GRIER LAMBERT