

A LEGACY IN DETAIL



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Marilyn J. Praisner laughs in a December 2006 interview at her office in the County Council building in Rockville. Praisner, a three-time council president and the longest-serving woman in council history, died Friday at 66.

Marilyn Praisner served the county with a keen eye and sharp mind

BY C. BENJAMIN FORD
AND PATRICIA M. MURRET
STAFF WRITERS

Montgomery County Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner's legacy can be found in the county's parks, in its public services, and in the arcane policy details that make government work.

"Her legacy is one that, at first blush, is not always obvious to people," County Executive Isiah Leggett said. "She was not about the flashy, obvious things, throwing her name on a bunch of fields ... but rather more for the fundamental things that make it possible for the county to do all of those good things."

Praisner, who served longer than any other woman in the council's history, died Friday from complications of surgery Wednesday to replace a heart valve. She was 66.

The meticulous grandmother and former CIA bureau chief pored over the fine points of budgets and committee reports with such care and attention, she was once dubbed the "Princess of Process."

"They're tedious and they're not always exciting, but she would deal with them. She'd read and respond to the most minute detail of process that has benefited this

Eugene Lynch
remembered for
public service
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county beyond measure. That, to me, is her legacy," Leggett (D) said. "The things she fought for were the things that produce good government. You followed the process. You had transparency. And the courage and willingness on occasion to raise the tough questions or to give the tough answers."

Leggett, who called Praisner a loyal supporter and friend, said she had helped him over his years in government.

"It's a big loss to the county," Leggett said. "We may not notice it from day one, but as we go forward, hers will be a difficult role to fill."

A Democrat who represented the council's District 4, Praisner received praise from state and county leaders, who hailed her as a powerhouse who understood how to make government more accessible and transparent to people.

"Marilyn was one of the folks that understood that," said Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

"That was something Marilyn always talked about — that things got decided when there was a fair and open dialogue that was inclusive," said Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-A large) of North Bethesda. "She worked hard to make sure that did happen."

Known as a hard worker, she attended her last council meeting on Tuesday to squeeze in as much work as possible before going in for the surgery on Wednesday morning.

"I'm going to miss her terribly," Trachtenberg said. "She came



CHRIS BASSI/THE GAZETTE

Montgomery County Council members (from left) Nancy M. Floreen, Roger Berliner and Michael J. Knapp gather outside Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Home in Silver Spring at the viewing for Marilyn J. Praisner on Monday afternoon.

into my office [Tuesday night] and we hugged and I wished her well. She gave me a to-do list, recommendations of things to read and get more information on. There were a lot of things going on in the county certainly related to the budget. I joked with her, 'You're giving me my marching orders' and she said, 'Yes.'"

Former Councilwoman Nancy H. Dacek, who served 12 years on the council with Praisner, said the county is particularly going to miss Praisner's ability to study a budget and find what could be cut and what could not.

"It's a real loss to the county and it's a real loss to the council and it's a real loss for those of us who were her friends," said Dacek, a Republican. "She was the hardest working member of the council that I'd ever known and so

very bright. I'm not sure that's a legacy, but she was one who I and others on the board looked up to and looked to for information on the budget and everything else."

Behind the scenes, Praisner helped shape the county by making sure money could be found for the programs to make the county a better place and to make the hard decisions on saying no when money was not available, Dacek said.

"Marilyn was someone who had strong convictions on things, but was willing to listen to everybody, and anybody and she truly did listen," Dacek said. "She didn't just give it lip service. She'd take from her reading and all she heard from people and she'd come to her position."

As a negotiator, she would work to build a consensus on the council and though she repre-

sented her district well, she also could see the big picture for the county, Dacek said.

Praisner's daughter Alison Khumpy thanked all the county residents and leaders who had sent well-wishes and condolences.

"I guess I would just want people to know how much she loved Montgomery County and how she worked so tirelessly for so many hours for so many years to make it a better place to live," she said Friday. "And how proud we all were of the all the accomplishments and awards she has been given through the years."

Most of all, she said, she wanted to say "just how much we loved her and how much we are going to miss her."

Through tears, she said she had been watching Leggett and Montgomery County Board of Education Member Nancy Navarro share their memories on television.

"We just greatly appreciate everyone's love of my Mom," she said. "She shared herself with the county so much and I appreciate everyone sharing back right now."

On the morning of Nov. 16, Praisner was involved in a fender bender crash in the Burtonsville area. After exchanging information with the other driver, she again drove off the road and into a tree. It was learned later she was suffering from pneumonia. Coupled with a collapsed lung from the second crash, Praisner was in the hospital for six weeks. Her heart trouble was discovered while she was in the hospital and surgery was scheduled.

A Calverton resident, Praisner

MARILYN J. PRASNER

■ Married with three children and four grandchildren

■ Represented District 4 (Aspen Hill, Burtonsville, Calverton, Clavary, Colesville, Derwood, Fairland, Olney, Sandy Spring, Silver Spring, Spencerville, Wheaton, and White Oak) on Montgomery County Council since 1990

■ County Council president three times, in 1993, 1997 and 2007

■ Chaired Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee

■ Served on Management and Fiscal Policy Committee

■ Served on the county Board of Education, 1982-90; board president in 1984 and 1987.

■ Member of the board of directors of the National Association of Counties (NACo)

■ President of the Maryland Association of Counties in 2003

■ Spent 16 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, serving as an intelligence analyst, branch chief and staff member for the Deputy Director of Intelligence.

DONATIONS

In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to the Ida Raitano Fund at Douglass College at Rutgers University, Praisner's alma mater. Contributions may be sent to the Ida Raitano Fund/Douglass Annual fund, Douglass College Alumnae Association, 181 Ryder Lane, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8557.

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PRASNER

was the longest-serving current member of the council, in her fifth four-year term. Prasner just completed her third one-year term as council president and had previously served three one-year terms as council vice president.

Among her many accomplishments, she was known for her advocacy on children's issues and nationally recognized leadership on technology and telecommunications legislation.

Prasner, a 58-year resident of Montgomery County, is survived by her husband Donald Prasner, three children and four grandchildren.

Prasner previously served as a member of the county's Board of Education, where she led efforts to reduce class size, expand counseling services and add school facilities for day care and health services.

Earlier in her career, Prasner worked 16 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, serving as intelligence analyst, branch chief and staff member for the Deputy Director of Intelligence.

Councilman Philip M. Aralocas (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said he had last seen Prasner in her office Tuesday before her surgery — and that the “devoted” councilwoman had been “working as much as she could” and “eager to get back to work.”

Prasner had attended a full day of council activities that day and “in typical fashion had worked on council-related matters long into the night,” despite the next day's scheduled surgery, council spokesman Neil Greenberger said in a statement.

Andrews, who served nine years with Prasner on the County Council and the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee, called Prasner a mentor and good friend whom he would greatly miss.

“She was a model public official, remarkably hardworking, exceptionally conscientious about serving her constituents and always living up to the trust public placed in her by the public,” he said.

Moreover, “she had a wonderful sense of humor that showed that — while she was extremely conscientious about her work — she was able to laugh at herself and appreciate the humor in a situation,” he said. “That's very helpful on the County Council and anywhere else.”

When Don Epps first moved to Calverton nearly 40 years ago, Prasner was one of the first people to greet him as part of a neighborhood welcoming committee.

Even when Prasner later represented Epps and all of eastern Montgomery County, first on the Montgomery County Board of Education and then on the County Council, he thought of her as a friend above all.

“She was always very supportive and loved the Calverton community,” said Epps, president

of the Calverton Citizens Association. “She gave her best to us.”

Anne Key Brown, director of the Eastern Montgomery Regional Services Center, worked with Prasner for more than a decade.

“I am devastated,” Brown said Friday afternoon. “She was the east county's best friend.”

Brown, who worked with Prasner for more than a decade, said Prasner pushed for more resources and recognition for residents who felt slighted because they did not live in an urban center. Prasner's efforts led to the opening of the Eastern Montgomery Regional Services six years ago.

“I can't imagine things without her,” she said. “She would always say, ‘Call me Marilyn,’ but it was so hard for me because I thought so highly of her.”

Barry Widex, president of the North White Oak Civic Association, first worked with Prasner in 1995 to fight a proposed cell phone tower in the Martin Luther King Jr. Recreation Park in Silver Spring. Three years later, Prasner made sure undeveloped land behind the White Oak Library became a low-scale, low-density housing community, which residents preferred instead of a Park and Ride or an apartment project.

“She looked above politics to what was in the public interest,” Widex said Friday afternoon. “She was always a big help for us.”

Prasner was a frequent guest at the association's meetings. At one meeting last summer, Prasner and residents had an animated discussion about housing code enforcement.

“She didn't always tell people what they wanted to hear,” Widex said. “She wanted to do the right thing.”

Stuart Rochester, an east county activist, last talked to Prasner on Wednesday before her surgery. Thirty minutes of their conversation was about a variety of issues Prasner wanted to tackle after her procedure.

“I said jokingly, ‘Marilyn, I'm glad to see you're slowing down,’” Rochester recalled Friday. “But it was not in her makeup to slow down.”

Rochester said Prasner deserved credit for her visible accomplishments in the east county, such as the services center and Fairbairn Library and community recreation center, but also for her behind-the-scenes work. Prasner was involved in many zoning and land use issues, he said, and in the last year had been trying to find a new home for the Dutch Country Market.

“Calverton, ballfield and Buntsville would have been much poorer places without her,” he said.

Barbara Foresti, chairman of the White Oak Master Plan Committee, said Prasner was a big supporter of master plans and got committee members to believe in their visions.

“I admired the way she stood up for us,” she said. “All of east county loved her and what she did.”

Staff Writers Doreen Jacobs, Margie Eppsp and Sebastian Montes contributed to this report.