

# A Man of Principle and Good Humor

*Former WASB executive director passed away April 25, 2015*

by Annette Talis

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othing happens in isolation; you have to look at what came before and what happened later, Ken Cole would say when pressed to consider his legacy after he retired from the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) in 2005.

Ken, who worked for the WASB for 37 years and served as the association's second executive director from 1988 to 2005, died April 25 after a two-year battle with cancer.

Ken started his career at the WASB in 1968 working with one colleague, Senn Brown, and their boss, George Tipler, the WASB's first executive director. They supported school boards in all areas of policy-making and governing. The legend, still repeated today, is that the one telephone at the association's office started ringing off the hook in 1971 when a new state

law established a duty for public employers to bargain collectively.

"I first met Ken in 1972, when I was administrator for the small school district of Marshall. The board hired the WASB to help us with bargaining and Ken was assigned to work with us. He brought a love of children to the people in Marshall. Ken wasn't mean-spirited. He wasn't anti-teacher. He respected teachers. We could sit together in a room and bargain a contract peacefully," remembers John Benson, who later served as State Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1993-2001, years that over-

lapped Ken's service as the WASB executive director.

Although he became a leading voice nationally in describing the school board's significant role in public accountability for student achievement, Ken's overall focus on the school board's primary duty to serve children dated back to his earliest days at the association. He long believed he was hired by Tipler, known for his dedication to "the boys and girls" of Wisconsin, who perceived something about Ken's character when the young job applicant spoke about his eldest daughter,

Kellie. She was later joined by four siblings — Marcus, Claire, Christian and Cameron. Ken always asserted that he got his job at the WASB as much for his dedication to his own children as for his professional skills and educational background in economics.

Within the WASB, among the staff and



*Ken Cole with his wife, Elise, and their children and grandchildren at the time of his retirement from the WASB in 2005.*

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membership, Ken's stories about his children were familiar. He started meetings — large and small — from the core perspective of his own family. Working outward from that center, he offered his ideas and inspiration about the duty of communities, working through school boards, to pass the baton to the next generation.

Ken was unconcerned that his best work was largely invisible to most people because that meant it was focused on the interests of children or



*Ken Cole being interviewed during the contentious time of teacher strikes in the 1970s.*

shined a spotlight on school boards and district administrators in the specific context of their own districts.

“What I did was relegated to the back, to keep the school boards together and focused on our issues — the young people,” was the only summary Ken ever offered about his own contribution to public education in Wisconsin. Emotional human controversies — that eventually became collective bargaining “dust ups” — are usually best forgotten after they are resolved, Ken would

sometimes say. In the sotto-voce tone he developed as a negotiator, he quietly suggested it might be best if he were remembered simply as a man who worked in a “tiny little office with a huge map of Wisconsin,” borrowing the words his eldest son, Marcus, used to describe the early years of his father's career.

Ken spent 37 years using that huge map to drive to all corners of the state on a campaign with no other purpose than to make government work in communities grappling with the most difficult issues of all for state and local government: How do we create and maintain excellent public schools, fairly compensate teachers for doing society's most important jobs, and recognize the fiscal limitations of taxpayers and businesses that support this most important public endeavor?

As for the history of Wisconsin collective bargaining, Ken saw it all. When he started at the WASB, there was no law requiring local governments to collectively bargain with unions representing employees. In the 1970s, Ken helped the Wisconsin Rapids School District and many others end teacher strikes by resolving the underlying contract disputes. In 1978, Wisconsin law changed to require that contract disputes be resolved through binding arbitration and Ken led the WASB's efforts to provide school boards with cost-effective representation in bargaining and arbitration. It was always Ken's goal to get those adult conflicts and personnel issues resolved so the school leaders could get back to the heart and soul of their business: children.

With his affable good nature and professional skill, Ken was good at old-fashioned retail politics without the political motivation. By the time he became executive director of the association, he knew the highways and byways of the state and could

locate schools in communities large and small, often recalling when they were built, how much they cost and how many referenda it took to earn the approval of voters.

Ken recognized that binding arbitration favored the unions and traveled the state to speak to anyone who would listen. Those efforts bore fruit in 1993 when Wisconsin modified the bargaining law to deny teacher unions binding arbitration if school boards offered a contract settlement meeting the requirements of a “Qualified Economic Offer.” The “QEO” was to be in place for three years under the original legislation, but was extended and made permanent (through 2009) with Ken's leadership and the support of the WASB. Ken retired before Act 10 became law, but experienced the transition away from collective bargaining as a school board member and later board president of the Mount Horeb School Board.

“Ken was one of the most decent people I have dealt with on the education scene, thoughtful, smart, level-headed, trying to push constructive and forward-thinking ideas, and open to talking about them (always a high quality in a reporter's eyes). He really valued education and doing it well,” said Alan Borsuk, a former education reporter for *The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* who is now a senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette University Law School.

In retirement, Ken served on the Mount Horeb School Board, from 2007 to 2011, which was a fitting capstone to his career because Ken considered the school board the highest rung of our democracy, where trusted community leaders are elected to directly confront the future and make decisions about the education of children. ■

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