

Robert A Heberle d-06092013



Considering all the time Bob Heberle devoted to war protests, his four arrests for nonviolent civil disobedience didn't surprise those who were close to him.

When friends and family gathered Saturday for his memorial service, they remembered when Heberle — a veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard — deployed himself in a rubber raft on Lake Minnetonka to intrude on a political fundraiser attended by Vice President Dick Cheney. He was investigated by the Secret Service.

"That was his favorite arrest," said Jean Heberle, his wife of 55 years. "He loved his country, but he was antiwar and believed people all over the world are the same."

Heberle, 79, died Sept. 6 after an 18-month battle against lung cancer.

Heberle, who graduated from Cretin High School in St. Paul and the University of St. Thomas, worked for 34 years as a public high school teacher in Minneapolis before turning to peace activism in retirement. He taught language and social studies, but finished his career helping dropouts get diplomas.

Outside the classroom, Heberle led union fights to raise teacher salaries and immersed himself in the historic desegregation of Hale and Field elementary schools in 1969 and 1970. "He was always fighting for the underdog," Jean Heberle said.

Heberle's primary platform for denouncing warfare was Veterans for Peace. He served on the organization's national board of directors and was officially commended for longtime service shortly before he died. "He was soft-spoken, but direct," said Larry Johnson, president of the Twin Cities chapter.

Heberle, an alcoholic who finished his life with 30 years of sobriety, was as disciplined as he was gutsy, Johnson said. He used careful research and his knowledge of the history of war crimes, for instance, to stoke outrage against U.S. torture tactics in the period after 9/11. Heberle also was behind a Veterans for Peace initiative that coordinates churches in more than 60 U.S. cities to ring bells every Armistice Day for world peace.

"He believed the best way to honor war veterans is to work for peace," Johnson said.

At the Church of St. Joan of Arc in south Minneapolis, Heberle brokered a lasting friendship with a community of Catholic nuns in Guatemala City. Members of the project, now known as Tierra Nueva II, recently presented him with a prayer blanket. Heberle's affection for Latin America stemmed from two years of teaching in Mexico on a Fulbright Scholarship in the 1960s, his wife said.

He also traveled repeatedly to a Bavarian village, where his grandfather had dodged conscription into the German army and then fled to America in the early 1900s. "Bob always felt it was in his genes to be antiwar," Jean said.

His "favorite arrest" came on June 26, 2006, when he tried to read a statement against the Iraq war in front of Cheney and fundraiser guests at an exclusive lakeside home, said Roger Cuthbertson of Shorewood, an accomplice in the afternoon venture. The protesters launched separate rafts from a pontoon boat in Halstead Bay, but were stopped by police before they could reach shore. They were questioned, jailed in Mound and unsuccessfully prosecuted on nuisance charges, Cuthbertson said.

"He had a lot of mettle," Cuthbertson said. "He was a nice man who was very passionate about peace."

Heberle is survived by his wife and their children Bob Jr. of Eagan; Mary Hamm of Spring Lake Park; Ruth Wolf of St. Anthony Village and Janet "Juana" Rudzki of Navarre Beach, Fla.; and six grandchildren. A memorial service has been held.