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## [cchcc-I] CCHCC tribute to Bob Kirchner

1 message

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Allison Jones <allison@healthcareconsumers.org>

Tue, Apr 19, 2011 at 10:34 AM

To: cchcc-I@lists.shout.net

From CCHCC's Executive Director, Claudia Lennhoff

Dear Friends,

It is with a very heavy and broken heart that I write to tell you about the death of Robert G. Kirchner, a dear friend, and hero, to us at Champaign County Health Care Consumers (CCHCC).

Bob Kirchner, only 54 years old, died of a heart attack on the morning of Sunday, April 17. Bob was a local attorney who defended many who had no resources; he also helped and legally supported many local non-profits, including CCHCC, and he served on the County Board and the County Board of Health -- among many other activities. Bob was a true champion of justice for people, and for the organizations who fight for justice for the people.

Our deepest sympathies go to Bob's wife Gerri Kirchner, with whom he had a great and beautiful partnership and to whom he was utterly devoted. Our sympathies also go to Ruth Wyman, our dear friend and the young attorney with whom Bob worked for many years.

A short obituary can be found at The News-Gazette at:

<http://www.news-gazette.com/obituaries/2011-04-19/robert-kirchner.html>

And a nice feature on Bob can be found at The News-Gazette in their "Life Remembered" article at:

<http://www.news-gazette.com/news/people/2011-04-19/life-remembered-kirchner-brought-energy-passion-lifes-work.html>

WILL-AM 580 Radio also did a nice piece on Bob, and that can be found at:

<http://will.illinois.edu/news/spotstory/atty-and-fmr-co-bd-member-robert-kirchner-dies/>

But I wanted to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Bob, in the way that we knew him at CCHCC, and the way I knew him as a friend and champion of justice.

I first met Bob in 1999, when I was a scared and very green "Interim Director" at CCHCC. The occasion for meeting Bob was that he agreed to help CCHCC, pro bono, in a legal struggle against Provena Covenant when the hospital ended the Medicare 100/Plus Program. (Please note that CCHCC now works closely with Provena Covenant, and the Medicare 100/Plus Program was reinstated in 2005.)

It was a very tough struggle, for many years. Probably for many more years than any of us had anticipated. And there are many stories I can tell, but I will just share one story -- it is about the moment, when as an adult, for the first time in my life, someone became my personal hero. Someone swept in and "saved" me (and CCHCC) from a terrible and terrifying situation. That person was, of course, Bob.

The struggle with Provena Covenant was very nasty and I was clearly out of my league as a brand new Director. One day, I received a very intimidating package from the then-IL Attorney General's office. It was a set of "interrogatories" demanding that I produce a bunch of documents and answer a bunch of questions that clearly implied that CCHCC was undertaking fraudulent and illegal activities in the efforts to reinstate Medicare 100/Plus. The AG's letter basically said that we were lying to seniors about the Program and trying to coerce under false pretenses their involvement in the program. It also said that the IL AG's office could bill CCHCC for the costs of their investigation into us! An action like this could have sunk CCHCC financially, and the threat was very real.

The first person I called was Bob. He was calm, of course, and I felt the tiniest bit reassured. I was a very new Executive Director and I didn't want CCHCC to fail on my watch, and certainly not for something so unfair. Bob set up a meeting with staff of the AG's office, and Mike Doyle and me. We traveled to Chicago for the meeting, where Mike and I answered a bunch of interrogatories to the AG's staff. It was terrifying, and I could see from the cold blank stares of the AG's staff that it was not really going well.

I never understood where the AG's office got the idea that CCHCC was defrauding consumers, and when I tried to ask about this, we got no answer.

Then, out of nowhere, Bob said, in his very calm and soft voice, that he knew that high-ups from Provena had met with staff from the AG's office, and he gave the dates and times of the meetings -- and he looked at each one as he said "they met with you, and you, and you, and you..." -- and he went on to say that the AG's office seemed to be subverting their legal and ethical duties in order to do the bidding of a corporation.

Stunned silence!

Followed by awkward throat clearing noises and furtive glances between the AG's staff.

And I sat there knowing that Bob had just dropped a bombshell that was going to turn everything around. What the AG's office was doing was illegal and wrong, and they were busted!

In that moment, I felt that I and CCHCC had been rescued from the forces of corruption, and Bob became my first personal hero.

Bob had had this information up his sleeve, from who knows where. He was never one to brag or talk unnecessarily.

In less than a week, CCHCC got a letter from the AG's office saying that they were dropping their investigation and thanking us for satisfying their interrogatories.

That's just one of many stories. But it's the one where I learned that I could totally and completely count on Bob, and that he would fight with all he had in the pursuit of justice. Not only did Bob become my personal hero, but I knew that he was a champion, the likes of which I'd never known. I never imagined that he wouldn't be here...

Because of Bob's tenacious, principled and dedicated work on behalf of CCHCC, we established in 2005 the Robert G. Kirchner Legal Justice Award (read more about the award at the bottom of this message).

Beyond helping us with the Medicare 100/Plus Program, Bob was a champion for low-income children while he served on the County Board and the County Board of Health. On Bob's watch, we (CCHCC, Bill Mueller, working with public health advocates on the Board of Health -- Michele Spading, Karen Bojda, Jan Thom and others) were able to create the child dental access program to provide free dental care to low-income county children. Believe it or not, we had to fight year after year to keep that program alive -- there were opponents to the program! And year after year, Bob championed that good fight and the low-income children got dental care.

Over time, that program grew and led to the creation of the now well-established non-profit, SmileHealthy, where Nancy Greenwalt is the Executive Director.

<http://www.smilehealthy.org/>

These are just a few examples of Bob's work -- testament to his commitment to justice and his dedication to making concrete improvements in people's lives.

But Bob wasn't just a champion and a fighter. When he fought for you, or your cause, he took you under his wing, and you became friends. He was a true and loyal friend, always concerned about your well-being. In his own unique way, Bob was a real caretaker. He made you feel looked after and safe, and he was tireless in all that he did. He was so tough -- so very tough and fierce when he had to fight -- but he was gentle and kind and protective as a friend.

And he was generous.

I don't know how many suffering low-income clients I brought to Bob to help with some legal issue or another, where I would offer to pay for their consultation or they would offer to make payments as they were able to. Bob always helped my clients, and me too, pro bono. One time I asked Bob why he wouldn't let me pay him for legal services he provided to me, and he said that it was because I was always helping others -- as if somehow there was a community debt and that community debt was borne by him and it was up to him to re-pay it -- as if he himself wasn't also always helping others.

I marvel when I think of how generous Bob was with his time, energy, intellect, resources -- and that at the core of it all was his heart: his deep and abiding love for people, his love for justice, and his outrage at injustice and corruption and the devastation that those produce.

We at CCHCC mourn the death Bob Kirchner, a great and steady champion for justice, a champion for the people, and our beloved friend. We wish to honor and celebrate Bob's life and his accomplishments by working to protect the valuable programs in our community that Bob helped to create, helped to save, and helped to maintain.

With deepest sympathies to all who mourn for Bob Kirchner,  
Claudia Lennhoff  
CCHCC Executive Director

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CCHCC's Robert G. Kirchner Legal Justice Award) Bob Kirchner is a local attorney practicing in his own law firm in Champaign. Bob served as CCHCC's attorney from 1999 to 2005, providing his services pro bono, in the legal struggle to save the Medicare 100/Plus programs after Provena Covenant Medical Center terminated the then 15 year old programs without warning or

explanation, leaving 1100 low-income seniors without affordable access to health care. Bob provided his legal services selflessly and on a seemingly endless basis in this struggle for justice. When Provena Covenant Medical Center changed leadership and was ready to re-negotiate the reinstatement of the programs, Bob continued to provide his invaluable legal services. Without Bob's legal work, CCHCC would not have been able to sustain a six year long struggle, to its victorious conclusion. The Robert G. Kirchner Legal Justice Award honors attorneys and law students who use their legal skills in the pursuit of justice.

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## Life Remembered: Kirchner brought energy, passion to life's work

Tue, 04/19/2011 - 8:00am | Paul Wood

URBANA – Robert Kirchner is remembered as a tireless and passionate fighter in both political and legal circles.

Mr. Kirchner, 54, of Urbana died Sunday morning. Friends said he apparently had a heart attack.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete at Renner-Wikoff Chapel and Crematory, 1900 Philo Road, U.

"There will never be another Bob Kirchner in this town," said Linda Abernathy, who said he was the inspiration for her group Best Interest of Children.

"He was unique among the Champaign County Bar for how aggressive he was, what a bulldog he was," says fellow attorney Tom Bruno. "We lawyers have an ethical obligation to act in the best interests of our clients, and he would do anything to fulfill that obligation."

A former member of the Champaign County Board and of the Champaign County Public Health District board, Kirchner was a Democrat on the losing side of a split in his own party when he lost a second bid to the county board in 2006.

Former county board chairman Patricia Avery said he "leaves a void in the community, particularly for the under-served."

"He is an example of what I think a lawyer ought to be," says former law partner Blake Weaver. "He believed that our judicial system was the third branch of government, and ought to be treated with lots of respect, and he fought to give the law that respect."

He represented two men who claimed that Champaign police and Champaign County prosecutors violated their civil rights by stopping them from videotaping traffic stops in July and August 2004 and by seizing their camera and tapes. The county and city eventually settled with the two men.

Kirchner used every tool at his disposal, from a written argument to his voice in a political debate.

In 1996, Mr. Kirchner ran against incumbent State Rep. Timothy Johnson. A graduate of the University of Illinois College of Law, he practiced law in Champaign County for more than two decades.

He represented District 9 on the county board from 2001 to 2004 first by appointment to fill a vacancy in 2001, and then by election in 2002 to serve a two-year term.



Photo by: The News-Gazette

Bob Kirchner in a 2006 file photo.

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« April 2011 »						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

His wife Gerri is also very active in Democratic politics.

Former county board member Matthew Gladney said he learned a great deal from Mr. Kirchner.

"Sometimes we disagreed politically, but he was just standing up for his principles, and he always had a good reason," Gladney said.

Weaver said he considered his former partner a mentor.

"He was a true warrior. Bob worked harder than anyone I know; when you hired Bob, you got all of him. The causes he believed in, they had his full attention and energy," he said.

Fellow attorneys recalled that Mr. Kirchner had once sued over a call in a softball game.

"That was just his nature," Weaver said. "He believed everybody was supposed to be responsible for their actions. He called me on some of my decisions, too; we went round and round on a lot of things, but that never stopped us from being friends."

"That's emblematic of his passion for justice. He aggressively sought justice at every turn," Bruno said.

Avery said Mr. Kirchner did an "enormous" amount of work for her Champaign-Urbana Area Project.

"He was one of the great guys you can trust who will be there for you, a man of great honor and dignity," she said. "He had a lot of compassion for people, he was always there for the people who just did not have anywhere else to turn."

Abernathy agreed.

"His love for justice, his knowledge of the law, his commitment to the poor and needy and downtrodden there was no one else like him," she said.

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### Atty and Fmr Co Bd Member Robert Kirchner Dies

Story date: Monday, April 18, 2011 from Illinois Public Media News

UPDATE: This story has been updated to include comments from Ruth Wyman, and to note that Renner-Wikoff of Urbana is in charge of funeral arrangements.

Urbana attorney and former Champaign County Board member Robert Kirchner died over the weekend. A recording on the phone at Kirchner's law office in Champaign announced the death.

Kirchner was appointed to a vacant seat on the County Board in 2001, and was elected to a two-year term in 2002. He ran again in 2006, losing in a hotly contested primary

Champaign County Democratic Party Chairman Al Klein remembers an earlier, unsuccessful bid by Kirchner for Tim Johnson's Illinois House seat in 1996. Klein said Kirchner's slogan in that campaign was "Stand Up, Speak Out, Be Heard", and that it was a slogan which fit him well throughout his life and career.

"He was a stand-up guy," said Klein of Kirchner. "He liked to speak up on issues that mattered to him. And he thought everyone should be heard and their views considered which is why, of course, that he was an advocate and a successful defense lawyer."

Fellow Democrat Tom Betz served with Kirchner on the Champaign County Board. Betz, now the county board vice-chair, says Kirchner was always concerned about the long-term impact of county board decisions, and sought inclusiveness in making appointments to county commissions. Betz said his concern for inclusiveness could also be seen in his law practice.

Ruth Wyman is an attorney in Kirchner's law firm, and also a former Urbana alderwoman who, like Kirchner, has been active in the local Democratic Party. In a statement for WILL, Wyman says Kirchner understood that justice was something to work for, not something automatically bestowed at the courthouse. She says Kirchner was ready to take on difficult cases and cash-strapped clients that other attorneys would turn down.

"Bob would develop the legal theories and defenses necessary to see that his clients got justice", writes Wyman, "whether it was the lawsuit to reinstate the Medicare 100 Plus program at Provena hospital for low-income seniors, creating a child dental program for low income children in the county, defending African Americans who were being stopped because of their race, or stopping the strip search of juveniles at the Champaign County Youth Detention Center."

Betz adds that might not been the most profitable career path for Kirchner, but it reflected his values.

"I had my share of disagreements over the years with Bob," Betz said. "But I always felt it came from a position of deeply held principled values."

Kirchner's run for the Champaign County Board in the 2006 Democratic primary pitted him and Lisa Bell against more moderate incumbents, Steve Beckett and Barbara Wysocki. Betz said he felt the differences involved were more a clash of personalities than political views.

The 54-year-old Kirchner is survived by his wife, Gerri, who has also been active in local Democratic politics. Renner-Wikoff Chapel and Crematory in Urbana is in charge of funeral arrangements, which were pending, as of Tuesday morning.

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April 2011						
S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			6	7	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

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- [transportation](#)
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- [urban planning](#)

- [April 2011](#)
- [March 2011](#)
- [February 2011](#)
- [January 2011](#)
- [December 2010](#)
- [November 2010](#)
- [October 2010](#)
- [September 2010](#)
- [August 2010](#)
- [July 2010](#)
- [June 2010](#)
- [May 2010](#)
- [April 2010](#)
- [March 2010](#)
- [February 2010](#)
- [January 2010](#)
- [December 2009](#)
- [November 2009](#)
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- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
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