

A Tribute to Al Stern by the ACLU

Comments by Helen Williams and Jay Westbrook (11/7/2015) - read by Anne Hill

I'm very happy to be here with all of you and especially with Mickey. Although I'm a stand-in for Jay Westbrook, I concur with all he says about Al and with a few exclamation points.

(To all gathered here today, Helen and I regret that we cannot be with you in celebration of the life and work of Al Stern. We are in Asheville, NC participating in a 90th birthday celebration/family reunion for my aunt, only living member of my mother's generation.)

In 1973, Helen and I were traveling throughout Ohio, working with the Indochina Peace Campaign. IPC's mission was to organize pressure on swing members of Congress to cut off funds to the Indochina War.

Nixon had just been reelected and his "secret plan to end the war" had proven to be a fraud. It was really a plan to bomb the hell out of the Indochinese people. This triggered massive protests in the US and around the world sparking the murder of students at Kent State and Jackson State. Ultimately, Watergate proved to be the only secret that Nixon had.

Our first stop was Cleveland. We had a handful of contacts here and everyone said "you have to get with Al and Mickey Stern ..." We did ... and they couldn't get rid of us!

Over the next year Helen and I were frequently in Cleveland and Al and Mickey or Ray and Betsey Mikelthun would put us up ... *or put up with us*. I'm sure that from when she woke up in the morning for school, Rifka wondered where did these people come from?

We frequently stayed with Mickey and Al until Helen, Ira Arlook and I moved to Cleveland in 1974.

Out of Al and Mickey's generosity a life-long friendship took deep root. Later Helen and I realized that Al had become a father-figure to us. (Both of us had lost our fathers early in life.)

Al and Mickey - (you have to say their names together - because they had such a powerful bond together) had become the wise village sages in our lives.

Al had Deep Values and Impressive Characteristics

Al was generous with his home, time, resources and patience. Public and private gatherings of IPC were held in the Stern's home. Tom Hayden, Jane Fonda, Holly Near, former POW Bob Chenoweth and many others found safe harbor from constant travel and conflict. Receptions were held there before movie openings, rallies and speeches. Personally, when Helen and I got married in 1976, Al and Mickey opened their home to our families for the rehearsal dinner. The beautiful dress that Helen wore in the wedding - That Was Mickey's.

Al was studied – he did his homework! He was not impetuous like many of us. He read the entire Pentagon Papers. Often overlooked by many of us, Al had taken on the mainstream Israeli politics by advocating peace with the Palestinians. Al was fully knowledgeable about the roads to peace in Vietnam and in the Middle East.

Al was courageous. When Jane Fonda was demonized and ridiculed as Hanoi Jane. Al and Mickey always stood up as true friends. When Jane was arrested at the Cleveland Airport for having prescription medication and vitamins, it was Al who went to the county jail with bail and brought Jane home. Al was not afraid to stand up to his peers and stale conventional attitudes.

Al was innovative. While Helen and I were borrowing cars to get around or hitch hiking, Al flew his own plane. One time he invited Helen along to Dayton, when I still lived there. Helen and I had a wonderful day together thanks to Al. Al had a personal computer before anyone else and when I thought that “PC” only meant “Politically Correct ...” Al truly “thought globally and acted locally” long before the concept was printed on bumper stickers.

Because of Al’s drive to know the whole story - to find the truth - and his courage to put knowledge into action, activists turned to Al for leadership in crafting strategies and effective tactics. Al’s beliefs and actions were deeply **Progressive**.

Two parts of Al that we did not see close up were his competitive streak in tennis and his strained relations with conventional Israeli policy.

Anne’s Insert:

Al was persuasive. I’m sure Al’s ACLU colleagues know that as well as any of us – with the exception of the family – because Al so effectively promoted the mission and interests of the ACLU. I remember him insisting that I come over to the ACLU offices to visit. There was an art exhibit here, and before I knew it I had joined the ACLU and had purchased a drawing. Al also insisted that I drive his new Toyota Prius – he was one of the early buyers, it was good for the environment, after all. And as a result of that test drive, I bought a Prius in 2008 and still drive it today. Al was very persuasive.

And, back to Jay’s remarks.

Al is forever loved -

Helen and I remember so fondly Al's 50th Birthday celebration. The warmth and love shown and shared at that party is as real to us today as it was that night in their home. I vividly recall Mort Epstein's hilarious "tennis ball "sculpture of Al.

The laughter, warmth, and love that night will forever be with us - and so will Al.

Al personified the proven belief "If you want Peace: Live Justly and work for Justice."

Thank you Mickey, Brian, Gary, and Rifka for sharing Al in such a full way throughout your lives and for letting all of us participate in this special tribute to Al Stern.

Thank you ACLU for honoring such a humble and deserving person in this lasting way. In doing so, this tribute calls on all of us to stay the course and be our "better selves." **Live like Al!!!**