

Former Democratic House speaker dies; left mark that was 'deep and long'

By
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Marvin Barkis, the last Democratic speaker of the Kansas House, died on Friday. He was 81.

Barkis, a lawyer who was credited with leading efforts to pass the state's school finance formula, served in the Kansas House from 1979 to 1993.

His time in the Legislature included a stint as minority leader from 1984 to 1990 before he took the reins as speaker in 1991 and 1992.

He was just the third Democrat to lead the Kansas House.

"Speaker Barkis championed legislation throughout his career that propelled our schools forward and supported Kansas families," Gov. Laura Kelly said.

"His contributions to our state will not be forgotten. My deepest condolences go out to his family and loved ones," Kelly said in a statement.

Barkis practiced law in Miami County and had offices in Louisburg and Paola. He also practiced law in Kansas City, Missouri.

He graduated from Ottawa University in 1965 and from the Stanford University School of Law in 1968.

Vic Miller, the top Democrat in the Kansas House, came into the Legislature the same year as Barkis. He described him as a mentor and one of his closest friends.

"I was not lucky enough to be in the House majority the two years that he was speaker, but I think he left a mark on Kansas politics and governance that is deep and long," Miller said in an interview.

Miller said some credit the state's current school finance formula to Barkis.

Working with a one-vote majority in the House, Barkis was able to assemble a school finance formula that has lasted many years, Miller said.

Miller called the achievement "monumental."

"He's probably one of the most intellectual legislators I've ever worked with," Miller said. "The fact that he was a graduate of Stanford, I think, speaks for itself in terms of his level of intelligence."

Miller said that Barkis mixed humor with business in the Legislature.

"He liked to be witty," Miller said. "He was very serious about his business, but he also had a sense of humor to go with it."

Donna Whiteman was the House majority leader when Barkis was speaker. She called him a "brilliant person" and a "big thinker."

Whiteman said he was strategic in how he deployed his Democratic allies in the House.

Barkis put lawmakers in key positions to get things done such as appointing then state Rep. Kathleen Sebelius as chair of the Federal and State Affairs Committee and Joan Wagnon as chair of the tax committee, she said.

"He was very good at delegating to people and then expecting them to come up with some big ideas," Whiteman said.

"It was a very progressive time in the Legislature," Whiteman said, alluding to Barkis' work on education and children's issues.

"Marvin was always one to reach across the aisle and work with the other party to try to get good things done," she said.

In an interview with the Kansas Oral History Project in 2017, Barkis reflected on what he learned as speaker of the Kansas House.

"I had a whole set of things, you know, that I found to be useful in terms of what I did as a leader, and that was to not take yourself too seriously," Barkis said.

"Bring everybody along. Trust your committee chairmen. Don't second guess them. Don't try to be the smartest guy in the room. Try to take the responsibility for getting the smartest people to work with each other," he said.

Barkis hadn't always been a Democrat.

Barkis worked for Wayne Angell, an economics professor at Ottawa University, when he ran for Congress and later for Dave Owen when he ran for lieutenant governor.

"After the election, I decided the Republican Party was going more extreme to the right, and I was not going to be comfortable in it, and I'm not going to run for anything anyway, so I changed parties," he said in the interview.

"Like a lot of people, I'm a convert, and a convert is actually more serious than just somebody who falls into it," Barkis said.

"It's been for me a very important part of my life. I feel like our party speaks for children, speaks for those people in the shadows of life, the elderly, the needy.

"It's a party I'm proud to be involved in. And I can tell you, all through the years of my political career, this interest in children's issues drove me to be here and to want to make differences," he said.

He described his difficult decision to vote for the death penalty his first year in the Legislature, a position not popular for a Democrat.

"I did not know till almost to the last minute how I was going to vote. I ended up voting for the death penalty, and as a Democrat that was not exactly what you would do if you're planning on going into it in the future.

"But I came down on the side of pure deterrence, and the argument I made was: Somebody kills my kid, I want to know I don't have to do it in return."

Barkis is survived by his wife, Kay, and three children: daughter Anne, and sons Will and John, and five grandchildren; and by his sister, Marita Barkis.