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## Bucks County's 'protector' dies at 70

By: **ANNIE TASKER** (Sat, Jun/28/2008)

He used the phrase "grassroots" so much that his wife finally banned him from saying it in the house.

But it was a way of life for Robert Sugarman, a lawyer and activist whose involvement with environment, civil rights and land development spanned 40 years and two countries.

Sugarman died just after midnight Friday morning after a long battle with prostate cancer. He was 70.

Though his health had been failing for months, he only recently tapered off his workload at several municipalities where he worked as solicitor. In February, after closing his law offices in Doylestown and Philadelphia, he formed the PennFuture Center for Grassroots Support with Buckingham Supervisor Henry Rowan to establish support for citizen activists and public interest organizations.

"To me it's making the best of the situation, to be able to continue to do whatever I can do and still make a contribution," Sugarman said at the time, acknowledging his failing health.

It's hard to overstate the extent of Sugarman's involvement in southeastern Pennsylvania and its struggles. He represented Buckingham in legal proceedings surrounding PennDOT's Route 202 bypass and fought the notorious Pump, which sought to transfer water from the Delaware River to cool the Limerick nuclear power plant in Montgomery County. He served as solicitor in several municipalities including Warrington, Buckingham and Tinicum.

In Philadelphia, he fought to stop I-95 from being built as an elevated highway through Society Hill and a cross-town expressway from being built through South Street in Center City.

He also helped pave the way toward government positions for black politicians before it was the norm when, in 1971, he co-chaired the campaign of Hardy Williams in what was considered the first legitimate bid for mayor by a black candidate in Philadelphia. Sugarman's co-chair, Wilson Goode, who is black, would later become Philadelphia's mayor.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter appointed him to the International Joint Commission for U.S.-Canada border environmental protection. Sugarman's wife, Kathy, said she joked to Al Gore during a party that the former vice president stole the title of his movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," from a "60 Minutes" interview Sugarman gave during his time on the joint commission.

As Kathy tells it, Mike Wallace asked Sugarman, incredulous, why a company would not stop dumping toxins into a body of water though it knew the environmental impact could last for decades.

His reply: "Because it would be very inconvenient for them."

Sugarman's rsum spans 40 years, several fields and so many locations that even his family had a

hard time coming up with a complete list of his accomplishments.

That's not to suggest Sugarman's children weren't paying attention. His oldest, Karen, has a political rsum that includes two years working for the state Senate, and son Ken is an attorney. Jane is about to start law school after a stint working for Bucks County Commissioner Diane Marseglia's campaign, and Lily is thinking about doing the same after she graduates from Temple's environmental studies program. All bets are off for how 9-year-old Gabrielle will make a living.

Ken said his father was devoted to empowering citizens at the local level to control the decisions being made where they lived. He valued his working relationships.

A few days ago, Ken said he overheard his father on the phone with a Tincum Township official, explaining that his health would keep him from working for them anymore.

There was a pause. Then, he heard his father say, "I love you, too."

His clients loved him back.

Bucks County recently declared Sugarman's birthday, May 29, "Bob Sugarman Day." Lower Makefield supervisors named the stretch of Big Oak Road from Oxford Valley Road to the Middletown border Robert Sugarman Boulevard, after he helped battle a plan for big-box stores near the Oxford Valley Mall. Tincum named the Buckingham man an honorary resident.

Colleagues remember Sugarman as someone whose ideas helped shape communities.

"Bob was the most influential force in environmental law in Pennsylvania," said Bart Winokur, a Harvard Law School classmate and, later, a co-worker.

Sugarman was always passionate, he said. Winokur remembers sitting in the kitchen with him watching the Richard Nixon impeachment proceedings.

"Watching it with Bob himself was an experience," he said. "He was an experience."

Marseglia said Sugarman was able to look at a land development plan and anticipate what impact it would have on the big picture — the one who was able to connect the dots, so to speak.

"We've all lost an incredible friend, but Bucks County has lost a protector," Marseglia said.

**Annie Tasker can be reached at 215-345-3187 or [atasker@phillyBurbs.com](mailto:atasker@phillyBurbs.com)**

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