

Tested by Tragedy

New York Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver is the recipient of this year's top legislative leadership award.

BY EDWARD P. SMITH

As Americans watched the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, in horror, no state legislative leader in the country faced a challenge greater than New York Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. Not only was Silver the leader of the state's largest legislative body, he also represented the district where the attacks occurred. Neighbors, friends and constituents died that day.

"Great catastrophes, such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, pose a broad spectrum of challenges," Silver says. "It is easy to look at massive devastation and get lost in the enormity of it. Recovery requires leadership that can address the big picture but also ask the simple questions, such as, 'What do Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public need right now?'"

Silver was evacuated from his office building after the attack. He quickly turned a high-tech Winnebago into a rolling district office. "We kept people informed, gave them a shoulder to lean on, took their problems to the appropriate government agencies, helped them deal with their insurance companies, and got them access to their apartments and cars."

New York Assembly Majority Leader Ron Canestrari said Silver's leadership was crucial in the aftermath of the attacks.

"His community was devastated. But Shelly communicated a sense of strength, purpose and resolve that helped people get through very difficult circumstances and helped them get beyond the tragedy as best they could," Canestrari says.

Silver was first elected to the Assembly in 1976 from his district in lower Manhattan, where he was born and still lives. He became speaker in 1994, and is the longest serving Democrat in the job and the second-longest serving speaker in state history.

Silver is the recipient of this year's William M. Bulger Excellence in State Legislative Leadership Award, the nation's top legislative honor. The award is bestowed by the National Conference of State Legislatures and the State Legislative Leaders Foundation on leaders whose careers embody the highest principles of leadership and who are committed to protecting and strengthening their state legislature.

"My immediate reaction to the news that I had won the award was a sense of great honor, considering the list of previous award winners—all true public servants who have had distinguished careers," Silver says. "There was also that sense of satisfaction that comes with the recognition of your peers. I am truly humbled, because I have tried very hard to live up to the ideals of the Bulger Award—integrity, passion, vision and courage."

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Education, a revitalized economy and ensuring access to health care for the working poor, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and immigrants are his priorities.

His proudest accomplishment is the law creating universal preschool. "It is one of the best investments we can possibly make to ensure our future," Silver says.

But he also points to the broader accomplishment of ensuring the legislature's role as a strong, independent arm of state government. "I have had the extraordinary opportunity to lead my conference during the terms of five governors, and never once have we acted as a rubber stamp," Silver says. "I can tell you without question we have prevented policies that would have profoundly hurt New York's most vulnerable citizens, and for that I am very proud."

William Pound, executive director of the National Conference of State Legislatures, says Silver "has strengthened the New York Legislature through his leadership of a diverse Assembly and in modernizing the legislative institution. One of the strongest and longest serving legislative leaders in America, he is a worthy recipient of this award."

Stephen Lakis, president of the State Legislative Leaders Foundation, says Silver is well-deserving of the award. "Courage, conviction, fairness, integrity and dedication to the institution of the state legislature are the hallmarks of his career. He has steered the course through tumultuous times in Albany, always serving as a steadying voice of reason and always with an eye to serving the people of New York."

To Silver, the job is the reward.

"I have what I think is one of the best jobs in the world: Leading the New York State Assembly—an independent, member-driven institution where initiatives are crafted that often serve as a model for policies around the country and for the federal government."

