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Anthony J. Celebrezze

His dedication, honesty and efficiency combined to build a public service career few could rival

No finer tribute can be paid to a public official than to say that he served with honor and distinction.

And in a career in public service that spanned a remarkable five decades, Anthony J. Celebrezze, who died on Thursday at the age of 88, did just that.

As a state senator, as mayor of Cleveland, as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare, and as a judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals, Celebrezze never lost his sense of who he was or where he came from.

Where he came from was a poor neighborhood on Cleveland's near East Side, his family having moved here from Anzi, Italy, Celebrezze's birthplace, when Anthony was 2. One of 13 children and the son of a railroad track worker, Celebrezze himself worked as a laborer to put himself through John Carroll University and, later, Ohio Northern University Law School.

As a young man, Celebrezze took an interest in politics and, in 1950, ran and won an Ohio Senate seat being vacated by Howard Metzenbaum. In 1953, Celebrezze defied Democratic Party leaders and ran for mayor. His victory marked the first of what is still an unmatched string of five consecutive mayoral election victories.

As mayor, Celebrezze was a driving force behind the Erieview project in the area adjacent to the federal office building on E. 9th St. and Lakeside Ave. that today bears his name. He cleaned up many of the city's slums and his frugal and efficient management of city finances won the voters' affection.

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy appointed Celebrezze to the HEW job, and Celebrezze played a pivotal role in winning congressional approval of Medicare, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Water Pollution Control and Clean Air acts. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Celebrezze to his last job in public life, the federal bench.

But before Celebrezze left HEW, Johnson would say this of him, "With tolerance and energy, with single-minded purpose, he presided over the greatest thrust for the future of American education and health that his nation has ever known."

Never once in his long career was Celebrezze tainted by even a hint of scandal. Instead, he repaid the confidence of voters — and presidents — with nothing short of honest and effective service.

That is the legacy Anthony J. Celebrezze leaves his city and his nation.