

More than a media maestro

Mike Deaver's gifts to American politics

By Mark V. Serrano

As Michael Deaver's death became top national news the other day, the longtime adviser to Ronald and Nancy Reagan would have appreciated the irony that after a career of shaping news stories for other people — not the least of whom was the 40th president of the United States — no one could shape the countless news stories about him so well.

Most every story included a headline or an early reference to Mike as an "image-maker who changed American politics," "media-maestro" and public relations "guru." One reporter referred to Mike as a "media-manipulator." Imagine, 20 years after Mike left the White House that a political operative could be seen to have managed the independent press so skillfully.

None of the news stories made mention that Mike Deaver was nearly felled by an assassin's bullet on March 30, 1981, just missing Mike's head as President Reagan, Press Secretary James Brady, Secret Service Agent Timothy McCarthy and Washington, D.C., Police Officer Thomas Delehanty were all struck in the hail of bullets that day.

Naturally the stories all quickly referenced Mike's "fall from grace" when he was convicted of perjury in 1987 in a purely political attack from a partisan-controlled Congress soon after his departure from the White House. They also noted how Mike served 1,500 hours of community service as a part of his sentence, which he fulfilled working at the homeless shelter in Northwest Washington at 2nd and D Streets, counseling homeless addicts seeking a better life for themselves.

Few stories though referenced how years after fulfilling his unwarranted sentence, Mike was still counseling these broken men as the chairman of the board for Clean and Sober Streets, or how many of these men were welcomed into Mike Deaver's home to share Thanksgiving dinner with the Deaver family. In Mike Deaver's world, no one was below value and friendship.

Perhaps the most important role that Mike played for many of us though was as a friend and mentor.

In 1991, I was working for Mike Deaver and longtime Reagan political aide Jim Hooley at former President Reagan's office in Century City, Los Angeles. We were planning the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library official dedication scheduled for later that year on Nov. 3, 1991, along with Mr. Reagan's staff.

The Reagan library dedication would ultimately have all of the characteristic Deaver flourishes, including the historic first-ever participation among five living U.S.

presidents, a stirring performance of "God Bless the U.S.A." by Lee Greenwood, and a fly-over by Air Force jets that set the stage for a poignant address and old-fashioned performance from the "Gipper" — one of President Reagan's last public speeches.

Among other things, I was responsible for mailings to donors of the presidential library for various events surrounding the dedication. These included the high-end wealthy donors and friends of the Reagans, and regular Americans who spared \$100 or more in honor of Mr. Reagan's accomplishments and legacy.

We started getting responses for an intimate breakfast with the Reagans for their high-end donors only, but it was the low-end donors who were responding — and I quickly realized that I had made a disastrous error that would likely cost me my job. The mail vendor sent the exclusive invitation to all of the donors and I was responsible.

In a panic I rushed into Mike Deaver's office to report my mistake and offer my resignation. Expecting a rebuke, Mike merely said "wait right here" and walked down the hall to return a short time later. When Mike returned, he told me that it was all worked out; he booked a new event on the Reagans' schedule for all of the donors, and we would use it to raise more money for the Reagan library. The "maestro" had turned a very bad situation into a new opportunity.

I later asked Mike why he had not panicked when I first reported the bad news to him and he informed to me that "I can't afford to panic, I am a recovering alcoholic." I thus received what would be the first of many lessons from a gifted mentor and a cherished friend — that in every crisis there is a grand opportunity if only you have the presence of mind and the vision to look for it and see it. It is a lesson that I apply today and teach to young staff members that I now lead and mentor myself.

Mike Deaver's passing is most painful for his family of course, and for many friends and colleagues who had known Mike for longer than my sixteen years of friendship with him.

Perhaps through us Mike's legacy of enhancing the story will be conducted a thousand times over, particularly if we see an opportunity in every crisis — just not as well as the master himself.

Mark V. Serrano, who worked for Michael Deaver in 1991, has worked in Republican politics, public affairs and media relations for more than 20 years.