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Recommended Citation

Barrett, Evan, "Dan Harrington – Mensch Who Made a Difference" (2015). *Highlands College*. 68.
https://digitalcommons.mtech.edu/lib_studies/68

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Dan Harrington – Mensch Who Made a Difference

Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

September 27, 2015

I have been sitting before my computer, hands above the keyboard, trying to start one of my regular commentaries. There were so many tempting topics to choose from. The Montana GOP effort to force citizens to publically register their political party preference. The unique combination of Cry-baby and Bully that makes up Donald Trump. The Pope telling the US Congress to deal the human causes of global climate change. And more.

But my fingers wouldn't move to the keyboard. They were frozen, but my mind wasn't. It raced, full of thoughts of former State Representative, Senator and Constitutional Convention Delegate Dan Harrington of Butte. Teacher and union leader. Party leader and public servant. Family man and sports fan. All of these images ran through my head after Dan passed away unexpectedly.

Four words are commonly used to describe Dan Harrington. Butte. Irish. Catholic. Democrat.

One reason we were great friends and allies over 45 years is that those four words apply to me as well. But, in addition to having an Irish Catholic father, I have a Jewish mother. And from her heritage I find a fifth word that describes Dan Harrington: "mensch."

Leo Rosten, in *Joys of Yiddish*, describes a mensch as "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being 'a real mensch' is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous."

Dan Harrington was a mensch in his personal life. His wife Pat, their children and grandchildren all could count on Dan. He imparted great values by both word and deed. And he gave of his most precious resource, his time and attention, never missing a school meeting or a game or a recital or all the other small but important things that tell our children that they are important.

Dan also was a mensch in his public life, as a teacher, union member and public servant. In teaching, Dan's students attest to that. So many have posted on Facebook and via emails just how generous and friendly, humorous and informed Dan Harrington was as he advanced the knowledge of hundreds of our children.

As a public servant, including 32 years in the State Legislature, Dan Harrington reflected our best values: honesty, integrity, civility, and a dedication to make government work well for the little people, not just for the wealthy and the powerful.

Just two days before he passed away, Congressman Pat Williams, Federal Judge Don Molloy and I had lunch with Dan while attending the annual gathering of an increasingly small group of Delegates to Montana's 1972 Constitutional Convention. Little did we

know that within a few hours that group would become smaller with the loss of Dan Harrington.

As a 1972 Constitutional Convention delegate, Dan helped shape a new state Constitution that is now recognized as the best in the nation. That constitution defined and protected the rights of all citizens; structured a government that could work for all; and shifted power away from the powerful vested interests of the past, empowering the people of the state. After helping write and pass this great document, Dan Harrington joined the battle to preserve and perfect that Constitution through legislative action, which he did for 32 years in the Legislature. And there, as a leader in both education and taxation, Dan Harrington really made a difference.

No one was a more effective champion of an available and affordable quality public education for all Montana families. Whether it was the school foundation program, adequate appropriations or full-time kindergarten, Dan Harrington was on the front lines, not always winning, but always fighting for the cause. A mensch.

He was one of the people who helped make the Montana's tax system the nation's fairest. It wasn't always the legislation he passed that mattered most. Sometimes it was the legislation he stopped. Dan fought to stop the coal industry's draconian cuts in the coal tax; stopped the elimination of the business equipment tax for the big corporations; stopped unneeded cuts in the corporate income tax rate and worked to keep the personal income tax progressive and fair; fought to stop a sales tax from being enacted – all positions that helped the little guy. A mensch.

Pat Williams called him a “lunch bucket” liberal and Dan would have been proud of the label. Dan fought for working people his entire career. He worked with everyone, and he was willing to take less than one hundred percent because in politics you have to do that. But he never compromised his support for the little guy. Never, ever.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte thinking about Dan Harrington, a mensch who made a difference.

Evan Barrett of Butte, has spent the last 46 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.