



“Orrin Hatch’s longest staffer tells the story of the man behind the title”

By Melanie Bowen | Thursday, May 5, 2022

This week, our country mourns the passing of one of the most prolific lawmakers of all time — former Sen. Orrin G. Hatch. Dozens of tributes have been written to [honor the good senator](#), many of them paying homage to his legislative record, his [bipartisan achievements](#), or the [profound impact](#) he had on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

These are all defining features of the senator’s public service. But I would like to take a different tact by painting a personal portrait of the man Utah simply knew as “Orrin.”

As Orrin’s first intern and later his state director, one of the greatest privileges of my life was working alongside Hatch for nearly four decades. During that time, I had the opportunity to observe the genuine love he had for his family, staff and constituents. It was this love that animated his public service and helped him become one of the most effective legislators in American history.

Orrin had humble roots growing up in a ramshackle house amid the devastation of the Great Depression. But what Orrin’s parents lacked in material means they more than made up for in love and devotion to their children. His father was especially proud of Orrin’s work ethic. He used to say that Orrin put on a tie as a young missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — and then never took it off.

The dedication and sacrifice of his parents inspired Orrin to create his own loving home. Elaine Hansen was his bride and lifetime soulmate. Together, they raised their six children, and later, numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Orrin always credited his family as the key to his success. And he treated his staff like family too, always making room for one more at the kitchen table during state work periods.

Orrin used to say, “Once a Hatch staffer, always a Hatch staffer” — and he meant it. Over the course of his 42 years in office, he offered singular career opportunities to thousands of interns, Senate aides and campaign staff. The Hatch alumni network is arguably the most extensive in the state (and possibly even the nation). Dozens of leaders in federal government and in Utah’s legal and business communities launched their careers with Hatch. And Orrin did his best to keep tabs on all of them. This was part of his personal touch that made him so effective as a senator.

Each year, Orrin wrote and hand-signed thousands of Christmas cards to friends and former staff. And he would make hundreds of calls during the holiday season simply to check in on them and to express his love. This even includes one-time political opponents, such as Salt Lake City Mayor Ted Wilson, [who ran against Orrin](#) in the 1982 Senate race.

Orrin telephoned Wilson on Christmas Day nearly 40 years ago to see how his family was doing after a long and difficult campaign, and to wish them a merry Christmas. Moments like this illustrate what made Orrin so likable among Republicans and Democrats alike: He loved people so much that it was almost impossible not to love him back.

The genuine love Orrin had for others was most evident in his casework for constituents. Orrin took a personal interest in assisting tens of thousands of Utahns struggling to navigate the maze of federal government. A few poignant examples come to mind: the time Orrin appealed directly to the president of the United States to award the Purple Heart to an injured World War II veteran; the time Orrin worked late into the night to expedite a passport for a 15-year-old student leaving on a school trip to Europe, who – thanks to Orrin’s efforts – was able to catch her flight with 15 minutes to spare; or the time Orrin jumped through every bureaucratic hoop imaginable to process the naturalization papers of a Scotsman from Midvale whose final wish was to die as an American citizen.

For the Scotsman, Orrin was able to do in two weeks what usually takes two years. Among the most meaningful experiences of my career was meeting this sweet man from Midvale the day before he died. I remember the constituent’s wife wheeled him into a courtroom, where she helped raise his feeble hand to the square to take the oath of citizenship. It was a moving and miraculous moment that perfectly distilled what it means to be an American – and it was all made possible by Orrin Hatch.

Orrin’s favorite part of being a senator was rubbing shoulders with his everyday voters – whether it was on one of his many burger tours of southern Utah or at his favorite restaurant, Chuck-A-Rama. He never let the trappings of Washington get to him. He was a man of simple tastes who loved diet Dr. Pepper, Costco hot dogs, caramel popcorn and tuna fish sandwiches in between meetings.

Ultimately, it was Orrin’s gratitude that kept him grounded. During his last month in office, he wrote a song with Janice Kapp Perry to express his profound appreciation to the thousands of Utahns who supported him over the years. These were Orrin’s parting words after more than four decades in the Senate, where he passed more bills into law than anyone alive at the time:

Oh, the places we’ve been and the things we have done

All the battles we’ve fought and the races we’ve run

I guess there’s really nothing more to say

But I am thankful, so thankful today.

I, too, am thankful to have worked for this titan of the Senate. I am thankful for the front row to history I had serving alongside him. And I am thankful that his legacy is just getting started.

Two weeks before he passed away, Orrin called me on the phone. True to form, he expressed his gratitude for his family, the work of his staff and the remarkable life he was blessed to live. And then he said something I didn't want to believe but that I knew deep down was true: "Melanie, I won't be here much longer."

He was right — Orrin is no longer with us today. But his legacy is everywhere to be found. It lives and breathes through the countless constituents he helped over a lifetime of public service, through the thousands of leaders in law, business, education, philanthropy and politics who got their start in his office, and through the continued work of the [Orrin G. Hatch Foundation](#). After all, the Hatch Foundation was built to promote the commonsense policy solutions that were the hallmarks of Orrin's career — and will keep doing so decades after he's gone.

At the end of the day, all of us — in one way or another — were impacted by Orrin's legacy. It's incumbent on all of us, then, to keep his legacy alive for the next generation. May we do so by living as he lived: with love for all and malice toward none.

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