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SAM HALPERIN: A Hero's Life Well Lived

by Gail Spangenberg

With Sam Halperin's passing on May 6th, the adult education field has lost one of its greatest champions. For those who knew him and those who don't yet, the occasion is worth a few moments of quiet reflection.

In November 1966, Congress enacted the Adult Education Act of 1966 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. As assistant commissioner of education and deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (which predated the present Departments of Education and HHS), Sam was the architect and force behind that Adult Education accomplishment. His is the foundation on which we are building today, as the Adult Education system undergoes a transformation to meet 21st Century needs by adding college and job readiness services to its traditional GED and high school diploma offerings.

Sam had a lifelong commitment to achieving equity for the underdog, in wanting to help lift up our less fortunate fellows. I saw firsthand what an insightful and caring friend and colleague he was from our service together on the National Commission on Adult Literacy a few years ago. But I was impressed even more to discover from a posting in [Taking Notes by John Merrow](#) on April

16th the extent to which he mentored promising professionals of every age and persuasion and the affection they hold for him.

Sam's influence was deep and wide, intellectually rigorous, and honest. He was politically sensitive to both political parties and encouraged understanding of and engagement in the political process (see his nonpartisan primer [A Guide for the Powerless and Those Who Don't Know Their Own Power](#)). He was extraordinarily kind, generous, and wise, without any trace of self-importance, a soft-spoken everyday kind of guy with great sophistication and class.

When the National Commission on Adult Literacy issued its final report, *Reach Higher, America*, Sam took me aside and urged me to stay the course with an active CAAL follow-up and implementation program, which we did. Without that, he said, the work of the Commission would be just another good report gathering dust on a shelf. He was right!

As a young professional, Sam taught political science at Wayne State University and over his career he taught and lectured at Duke University, Columbia University, and many other centers of excellence. Following his government service, Sam founded and directed the highly respected [Institute for Educational Leadership](#). He later founded and directed the estimable [American Youth Policy Forum](#) from which he retired recently as Senior Scholar. Both organizations are bipartisan in nature. In the 80s and 90s, Sam was the study director of the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, whose major studies included the powerful "The Forgotten Half: Non-College Youth in America." He served on the board of directors of many organizations including CAAL.

Sam's special qualities and contributions are widely recognized. Among his many awards were numerous distinguished service awards for his work with Health, Education, and Welfare; the National Association of State Boards of Education; the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps; and Jobs for the Future. George Washington University awarded him the President's Medal. He received the Harry S. Truman Award from the American Association of Community Colleges. The National Child Labor Committee awarded him the Lewis Hine Award for Service to Children and Youth. A cause dear to his heart in recent years was the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Early in his career he was awarded a Congressional Fellowship from the American Political Science Association.

In losing Sam, we lose a unique adult education champion. But his legacy is huge and the impact of champions has a way of living on. In his posting about Sam to the state ABE directors network, NAEPDC executive director Lennox McLendon wrote that "we stand on the shoulders of those who come before us, and every one of us stands on the shoulders of Sam Halperin." It can't be said better than that.

In remembrance of Sam, and to better understand the breadth of his shoulders, readers are invited to rediscover the roots of Adult Education in his wonderful 2006 essay called [Reflections on the Fortieth Birthday of the Adult Education Act of 1966](#).

Sam would be proud and pleased, I think, that next week, in cooperation with Senator Reed's office, a CAAL panel of distinguished current leaders will give a nonpartisan Briefing on Adult Education to invited House and Senate legislative aides and other guests on Capitol Hill. Facts and figures will be presented to show the compelling evidence of need for stronger federal investments in Adult Education.

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