

A public servant all can be proud of

D.F. Oliveria/For the editorial board

(Publication Date: December 22, 1999)

The 2000 Legislature is going to be a little less colorful. A little less thoughtful. A little less compassionate. A little more partisan.

State Rep. **Jim Stoicheff**, D-Sandpoint, won't be there to hold tempers and bad legislation in check. His unexpected death to a heart attack Saturday leaves a void.

Even in recent years when the number of House Democrats dwindled to a baker's dozen, **Stoicheff** took the edge off bitter partisan debates. His good humor, thoughtful comments and practical approach to politics were welcomed on both sides of the aisle. "He was one of the real personalities of the Legislature," said Gov. Dirk Kempthorne. "He was colorful and tenacious in his approach, and I always saw a twinkle in his eye."

Stoicheff, or "Stoich," was so popular in Bonner and Boundary counties that no one opposed him for re-election in the 1990s, when District 1 shifted from heavily Democratic to a tossup district. He was a fiscal conservative who wasn't afraid to buck his party. He did that when he supported anti-abortion legislation. He did it again in 1998, when Republican Gov. Phil Batt announced he wouldn't seek re-election. **Stoicheff** walked down the aisle, hugged Batt and pleaded with him to reconsider.

A former teacher, principal and coach, **Stoicheff** was a friend of the elderly and the schoolchildren. He backed working people. But he refused accept donations from organized labor. In fact, he didn't accept any political contributions and repeatedly lost battles to reform campaign financing.

Stoicheff was famous for his loud jackets and colorful quips. In arguing for open-meeting laws, **Stoicheff** said: "The only thing that grows in the dark is mushrooms. Sunshine is good for everything." In opposing a plan to limit telemarketing, he said: "The best resolution of this is the word, 'click.'" He called a 1999 bill to extend greyhound simulcasting "the stinker of the session."

Stoicheff often said the worst vote he ever made was the one that helped legalize greyhound racing. He became an outspoken foe of that blood sport after greyhound carcasses began surfacing in area landfills. Later, he led the charge that outlawed live racing again.

At 72, **Stoicheff** had planned to retire after the 2000 Legislature and 14 terms. In recent years, he'd fought through health problems, including a heart attack and a stroke. Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, thought of him as the Energizer bunny who kept going and going. Longtime Democratic friend Mary Lou Reed figured **Stoicheff** would die at his seat in the Statehouse, "where he was most at home and most effective." He'll be hard to replace.