

# CHICAGO INC.

BY KIM JANSSEN, TRACY SWARTZ AND PHIL THOMPSON



## MIKVA REMEMBERED FOR GENEROUS SPIRIT

He may have started out as the original “nobody nobody sent,” but Abner Mikva was sent off in grand style Monday at a memorial service where he was feted by a crowd of political heavyweights including a Supreme Court justice and the president of the United States.

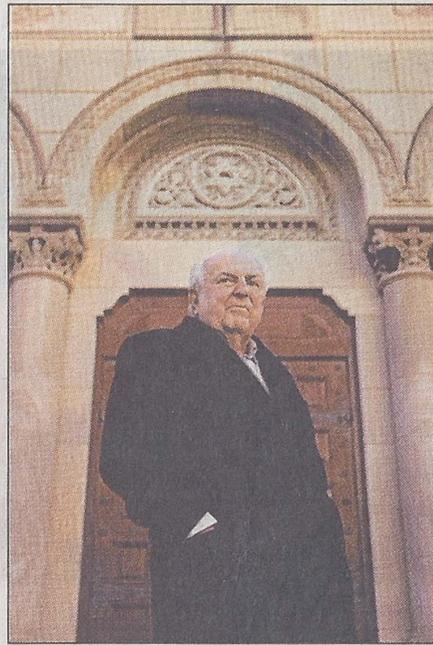
Elena Kagan and Barack Obama were two of the big shots who told a packed crowd at the Spertus Institute’s Feinberg Theater that he helped send them on their way in public life.

And Supreme Court nominee Merrick Garland was one of several speakers so moved by the memory of Mikva’s legendary kindness and decency that he choked up on stage.

The event came a month after Mikva — a beloved former congressman, federal appellate court judge and White House counsel — died at the age of 90. Best-known for his Chicago story of being turned away as an idealistic young man from volunteering at the 8th Ward office of the Democratic Party in 1948 by a stogie-wielding committeeman who informed him “we don’t want nobody nobody sent,” he was fondly remembered Monday for his wisdom, generosity and disarming wit.

“He was a real mensch,” said Garland, who volunteered for a Mikva congressional race in the 1970s and later followed him in becoming chief judge of the federal appellate circuit in Washington.

Garland recalled with embarrassment how, instructed by Mikva to drive advice



CHICAGO TRIBUNE 2008

Abner Mikva, a former federal judge and U.S. representative, was honored at a memorial service Monday.

columnist Margo Howard — the daughter of Ann Landers — from downtown to a campaign event in Skokie, he had “got lost” and “run out of gas” after leaving the A/C running in his dad’s Chevy.

“By the time we arrived, the event was over,” said Garland, who added that he

feared being fired. Instead, with “a big smile,” Mikva “put his arm around my shoulders and said, ‘Next time, start earlier and be sure you have a full tank of gas.’”

Garland teared up as he recalled when Mikva came to Garland’s father’s wake in 2000 and held Garland’s mother’s hand “for almost half an hour.”

“She never forgot that kindness,” he said. “And nor did I.”

In a lighter moment, former presidential adviser David Axelrod recalled when Mikva was informed of the death of former Illinois Secretary of State Paul Powell and asked whether he was surprised that Powell had been found with \$800,000 in cash in shoeboxes in his hotel room. Mikva shot back, “Only that the amount was so small.”

All three of Mikva’s daughters and sons-in-law and seven of his grandchildren also spoke, recalling how he delighted in provoking political and religious talk at the table.

“I wanted to tell you that my father maintained to the very end that Monica Lewinsky seduced Bill Clinton,” the middle daughter, Laurie, said of Mikva, who served in the Clinton administration. “But I have been instructed to talk about him as a dad and a husband!”

Perhaps the loudest applause of the day was for Christopher Butler, one of thousands of youths encouraged to become community leaders through the Mikva Challenge, the civic leadership

program founded by Mikva and his widow, Zoe.

“Life really is a lot easier when somebody does send you,” Butler said of the boost Mikva gave him. “We can all be somebody the Abner Mikva sent.”

That was a sentiment echoed by Obama, who sent a video message in which he thanked “my dear friend” Mikva for mentoring him.

“Ab wasn’t content simply to leave his own mark, which was extraordinary; he wanted to help others leave theirs, as well,” Obama said. “That’s why he inspired so many young people, including me, to pursue public service.”

Kagan, who was a law clerk for Mikva, may owe him even more. Making an apparent reference to the speech given by the father of fallen Muslim Army officer Humayun Khan, she said that until recently, Mikva was the only person she knew who carried a copy of the Constitution in his pocket.

In the White House, Kagan said, Mikva was known to “brandish” the Constitution at staff, and ask them, “Do you know what the Constitution says? It says the president can do this,” or, on other occasions, “It says the president cannot do this.”

Along with slices of cheesecake, mourners at a reception after the memorial were handed pocket-size Constitutions as keepsakes and guides.

— Kim Janssen