

'Tonight, he lost that battle': Congressman Donald McEachin dies at 61

[Virginia Congressman Donald McEachin died on Monday at age 61](#), weeks after winning a fourth term representing all of Richmond, parts of Henrico and Chesterfield counties, and the Tri-Cities area in the 4th Congressional District.

McEachin's death was sudden, but his illness was not. He had been suffering from the after-effects from the successful treatment of colorectal cancer eight years ago.

"We are all devastated at the passing of our boss and friend, Congressman Donald McEachin," Tara Rountree, the Democratic congressman's chief of staff, said in a statement on Monday night.

"Valiantly, for years now, we have watched him fight and triumph over the secondary effects of his colorectal cancer from 2013," Rountree said. "Tonight, he lost that battle and the people of Virginia's Fourth Congressional district lost a hero who always, always fought for them and put them first."

McEachin, [who was elected twice to the House of Delegates and served nine years in the Senate](#), had just defeated Republican Leon Benjamin on Nov. 8 for the second time. His fourth term was scheduled to begin in January.

"Until a new representative is elected, our office will remain open and continue to serve our constituents," Rountree said.

His wife, Colette, is Richmond's commonwealth's attorney. McEachin, a lawyer who lived in South Richmond, also leaves behind a son and two daughters.

"The family asks for privacy at this time," Rountree said. "Arrangements will be announced over the next few days."

McEachin, who stood 6 feet 5 inches tall, [revealed in 2018 that he had developed a fistula — an abnormal connection between the bladder and colon — as the result of cancer surgery.](#)

He lost 60 pounds and underwent a number of surgeries to correct the condition, which he treated as temporary and not an obstacle to his work in the House of Representatives.

McEachin was first elected to congress in 2016 after a court ordered redistricting of the 4th District as part of its response to alleged racial gerrymandering of the 3rd District by General Assembly Republicans.

The 4th District now includes all or part of 15 cities and counties, stretching from Richmond to Brunswick, Greenville and Southampton counties. It gets about three-fourths of its votes from Richmond and from eastern Henrico and eastern Chesterfield.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-3rd, hailed McEachin's legacy as "a trailblazer in Virginia politics" as the first African American to run as the nominee of a major party for attorney general in 2001, ultimately losing to Republican Jerry Kilgore, and as the third to be elected to Congress from the state.

(John Mercer Langston, elected in 1888 to represent the 4th District, was Virginia's first African American in Congress. Scott became the second 105 years later.)

"Donald was a thoughtful and principled legislator and respected by people on both sides of the aisle," Scott said.

Before serving in Congress, McEachin had a long career as a personal-injury lawyer and co-owner of the McEachin & Gee law firm in Henrico County, but he also has a master's degree in divinity from Virginia Union University. He did not

lead a church, but helped at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Beaverdam.

"There's ministry in the church, and there's ministry outside of the church," he said in 2018.

McEachin's priorities in Congress included protecting the Affordable Care Act and women's reproductive rights, combating climate change and promoting environmental justice, and preserving Black cemeteries.

He introduced the African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act, a measure that would provide \$3 million annually to preserve and restore Black cemeteries.

McEachin took personal pleasure in leading a successful effort to rename Fort Lee after Lt. Gen. Arthur J. Gregg, the Army's highest ranking minority general when he retired in 1981, and Lt. Col. Charity Adams. Gregg was a lifelong friend of the congressman's father, a U.S. Army veteran.

"It's a great day in Virginia," the congressman exclaimed after a congressional naming commission announced its choices in May to replace the former Confederate general's name on the sprawling base outside of Petersburg in his district.

On Twitter Monday night, Gov. Glenn Youngkin wrote: "It's so sad to learn of the passing of @Rep. McEachin. A valiant fighter until the end, he admirably served Virginia & worked tirelessly to improve the lives of his constituents & Americans. Suzanne & I are thinking of his family, friends & community during this difficult time."

U.S. Rep. Abigail Spanberger, D-7th, in a statement late Monday said: "Tonight, I am mourning my friend, colleague, and mentor Congressman Donald McEachin. He was a good

man who endeavored to make others feel important and heard whether in the courtroom, the General Assembly, the U.S. Congress, or simply in a quiet moment.

"He brought his passion for people, his sense of humor, and his abiding faith in God to his work every day — and he was a relentless advocate for those who needed a voice, our natural resources, and the people he represented."

U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., in a statement said: "Up until the very end, Don was a fighter. Even though he battled cancer and faced other trials in recent years, he never lost his focus on social and environmental justice. Tonight, Virginia has lost a great leader and I have lost a great friend."

U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., a former Richmond city councilman and mayor, recalled first meeting McEachin in 1985 and attending a party for his wedding to Colette.

"Our kids were the same age, we shared a statewide ticket with Mark Warner [in 2001], and we've been together in the Virginia federal delegation for years," Kaine said in a statement. "I was last with him on election night three weeks ago, celebrating his win."

"He was a gentle giant, a compassionate champion for underdogs, a climate warrior, a Christian example, an understanding dad, a proud husband, a loyal brother," he said.

"It is with profound sadness that we join the people of Virginia and the McEachin family in mourning the loss of our dear friend and colleague, the honorable Congressman Donald McEachin. Congressman McEachin was a tireless advocate for the people of Virginia and our nation. He

dedicated his life to advancing America's working families, creating economic opportunities, and promoting environmental justice for all. He leaves an unparalleled legacy of excellence and integrity, and we will honor that legacy with our continued dedication to the issues which he championed," said Congressional Black Caucus Chairwoman Joyce Beatty, in a statement.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney, a close political ally, said called McEachin "a progressive champion" and "a true public servant who, in sickness or in health over a 22-year career, always put the people first and never stopped working for and loving his community."

"His imposing frame was eclipsed only by a fundamentally kind and generous spirit, and the legacy of his many contributions to the welfare of this city will live on."

Elections aside, Richmond leaders agree McEachin will be hard to replace

When Henrico County Supervisor Tyrone Nelson's father died in August, Rep. Donald McEachin, D-4th, took an inconspicuous seat on the back pew at Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Jackson Ward, where Nelson is pastor.

"That was his way of saying, 'I'm here for you,'" Nelson said Tuesday.

[McEachin's death on Monday](#) was a personal blow to members of the Black community in the Richmond area, who long had looked to him as a political leader and mentor.

"I don't know if you can replace someone like Donald McEachin," said Nelson, who was first elected to the Henrico

Board of Supervisors in 2011 with the future congressman's help.

Still, once the mourning subsides, [Virginia Democrats and Republicans](#) will begin preparing to compete for the 4th District seat that McEachin had held for six years, with a new two-year term set to begin in early January after his victory early this month.

"Until a new representative is elected, our office will remain open and continue to serve our constituents," Tara Rountree, the congressman's chief of staff, said in a statement announcing McEachin's death on Monday night.

'A day to really focus on the congressman'

Gov. Glenn Youngkin will set the date for a special election, but he said Tuesday that now is not the time for politics.

"We will make decisions with regards to the special election," Youngkin said in remarks after dedication of toll lanes on Interstate 66 in Northern Virginia. "Today, we're really focused on remembering the great contributions that [McEachin] made."

"There are folks that I'm going to want to listen to as to the best time in order to call this," the governor added. "I want to make sure that Virginians are represented ... but today's a day to really focus on the congressman."

Rich Anderson, chair of the Republican Party of Virginia, said he expects party organizations to determine the method for selecting nominees through their 4th District committees.

"I'm sure the two parties, in the interest of speed, will do their own processes," Anderson said Tuesday.

Leon Benjamin, a South Richmond pastor whom McEachin had beaten twice by wide margins, has not indicated whether he would seek the Republican nomination for the seat a third time.

"We'll keep our options open," Benjamin said in an interview on Tuesday, while offering prayers for McEachin's family.

In a statement on Facebook on Monday night, he said McEachin's "accomplishments and achievements will be remembered and cherished in Virginia and around this Nation," and commended him for his long fight against cancer and its effects.

"He will be remembered as a hero who stood his ground in that hard fought battle," Benjamin said.

On the Democratic side, McEachin was chairman of the Senate Democratic Caucus when Susan Swecker became state party chair in 2015. She had known him from political campaigns before he won public office, so she was focused more on his memory than his congressional seat on Tuesday.

"When you have someone who has been such a big part of your life for such a long time ... the impact of the loss is really hard to absorb in less than 24 hours," Swecker said.

"As the good book says, for everything there is a season, and this will be a season to mourn and share your remembrances of good times and great accomplishments in the legacy of Donald McEachin," she added.

Del. Lamont Bagby, D-Henrico, is a potential Democratic candidate to run for McEachin's seat, but he didn't want to

talk about politics on Tuesday as he coped with the death of someone he described as “beyond a mentor.”

Instead, Bagby remembered how McEachin “always encouraged me and pushed me to get married.”

“I’m grateful he made it to my wedding” in late October, he said.

Like Nelson, Bagby owes his start in politics to McEachin, who was the first to endorse him in his bid for Henrico County School Board in 2007.

“No one knew who Lamont Bagby was, period, and I didn’t know what I was doing,” he said, “but he coached me through it.”

“He did a lot for me, but I’m sure he did the same for others,” Bagby said. “It inspires me to help people along the way.”

‘Everyone saw him fighting’

McEachin, Bagby and Nelson share common ancestry in Gravel Hill, a community in eastern Henrico that formed from the emancipation of slaves before the Civil War.

Bagby, first elected to the House of Delegates in 2015, is now chair of the Virginia Legislative Black Caucus, now with 21 members from both chambers. In early October, McEachin arranged for him to chair a panel discussion with the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington.

“He was a little weak, so he sat in the front row and just listened,” he said.

McEachin's long struggle with the effects of cancer treatment was no secret, although he kept the details of his health private and never let it stop him from focusing on his work, both in Congress and the community.

"Everyone saw him fighting," Bagby said. "He kept telling me, 'Don't count me out.'"

Sen. Jennifer McClellan, D-Richmond, who holds McEachin's old seat in the Virginia Senate, last saw him at the dedication of the Skipjack Solar Power Center in Charles City County.

"He seemed much stronger than the last time I'd seen him," she said. "I think everyone thought he had beat it."

McClellan also is a potential Democratic candidate in the 4th District, although her Senate seat will be crucial to a Democratic firewall in the impending General Assembly session against legislation to ban or restrict abortion.

She wouldn't talk about politics on Tuesday. "That's something I just can't think about today," she said in an interview. "I'm just remembering my friend."

McClellan first knew McEachin when she was a young lawyer and then as leader of the Metro Richmond Area Young Democrats, which she founded the year after he entered the House of Delegates for the first time in 1996.

She was chair of the Democratic Third District Committee when McEachin ran for attorney general in 2001 — the first African American to receive a major party nomination for the office in Virginia. He lost, but returned to the House in 2006, with McClellan in the same class of newly elected delegates.

“He was almost like a lion,” she recalled. “When he felt anyone was discriminated against ... he would get up and roar.”

At the same time, McClellan said, “He was also the gentle giant, who had a great sense of humor.”

Whether it was fighting for money to combat climate change in the Inflation Reduction Act, getting federal money to restore the Ettrick train station or expand high-speed internet in Charles City, “they were equally important to him,” McClellan said.

“He didn’t take himself too seriously, but he definitely took the job seriously and helping people seriously,” she said.

When McEachin was elected to Congress in 2016, McClellan won his seat in the Virginia Senate.

“I succeeded him,” she said, “but I could never replace him.”

McEachin sets an example for health care — again

Expansion of Virginia’s Medicaid program was hanging in the balance on the floor of the Virginia Senate more than eight years ago when then-Sen. [Donald McEachin, D-Henrico](#), made the stakes personal.

McEachin, a physically imposing man at 6 feet 5 inches, shared for the first time how his health insurance as a state legislator covered the cost of treatment of rectal cancer that had been diagnosed the previous fall.

With expansion of the program about to fail — blocking health insurance for an estimated 400,000 Virginians — he made the stakes personal for his Senate colleagues, too.

[“This is immoral,” McEachin said. “We can afford to do this. We have the ability to do this. We have the moral obligation to do this.”](#)

“Oh, it’s fine for us,” he said of state health care coverage. “But we would deny that to people who work every day ... How dare we?”

It took another four years for Virginia to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, but McEachin is still setting an example — this time with his death this week after dealing for nine years with the side effects of cancer treatment that may not have been necessary if he had been screened for the disease sooner.

“Don’t fool around. Don’t go through my journey. Go to the doctor,” McEachin told a packed audience at a Richmond theater screening of “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” a sequel filmed after the death of Chadwick Boseman, who starred in the original “Black Panther.” [Boseman died of Stage 4 colon cancer two years ago at age 43.](#)

Colorectal screening

Less than two weeks after that appearance, McEachin died suddenly at his South Richmond home. He was 61. Three weeks earlier, he had won a fourth term representing the 4th Congressional District, stretching from Richmond and parts of Henrico and Chesterfield counties to the North Carolina line.

The cancer hadn’t returned, but the effects of its treatment had long impacted his health, including the creation of a fistula — an abnormal connection between the bladder and

colon — that he disclosed publicly to the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 2018.

In his comments at the “Black Panther” screening, reported by WTVR Channel 6, he said, “Nearly every one of the health issues is related to the radiation I had to undergo to deal with my ... rectal cancer.”

Now, doctors and medical experts are using his example, as well as that of Boseman, to urge people — especially African Americans who suffer a higher rate of colorectal cancer than any other racial or ethnic group — to test for the disease, either by an outpatient colonoscopy or initially with at-home test kits.

“The best test is the test that gets done,” said Dr. Timothy Quinn, a Black doctor in Mississippi who tested himself with a Cologuard at-home kit after turning 50 recently.

Quinn, who owns Quinn Healthcare in Ridgeland, just outside of the Mississippi capital of Jackson, treats mostly Black patients, many of whom he said are reluctant to visit a doctor for a colonoscopy that involves unpleasant prepping the previous night and anesthesia to perform.

“Research has overwhelmingly demonstrated that in the African American community, we have a higher prevalence of either being diagnosed with cancer or, even worse, being diagnosed with cancer at a later stage,” he said.

Quinn is touting the examples of McEachin and Boseman to deliver the message of colorectal screening far beyond his own practice and state. But his model is his grandfather, who died of cancer but told his son to share the story so others would not wait to test for the disease.

“He felt that no death should be in vain,” his grandson said.

Getting people to test for colorectal cancer, especially at a doctor's office, became harder during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the American Cancer Society.

"We really want to close that gap," said Brian Donohue, director of government relations for the organization's Cancer Action Network in Virginia.

Donohue estimated 3,610 Virginians will be diagnosed with colorectal cancer this year and 1,370 will die from the disease.

The cancer society "remains steadfast in our work to address disparities in screening that contribute to the alarming rate of colorectal cancer deaths in Virginia," he said.

Early detection

Those disparities are clearest with African American adults, according to a research paper by the national organization in 2020.

"Collectively, Black people have the highest death rates and shortest survival rates of any racial/ethnic group in the U.S. for most cancers," the paper states.

Donohue said, "A person's ZIP Code should not determine their access to healthcare or the quality of their healthcare."

Long associated with older adults, colorectal cancer now is affecting people at a younger age, which is why the cancer society now recommends that people begin screening for the disease at 45 instead of 50.

"I can't stress to you enough the importance of early detection," McEachin said at the "Black Panther" screening.

He often set an example for others to follow in providing or seeking health care, but it wasn't easy for a man who generally kept details of his own health private and refused to let his personal struggles affect his public service.

Before McEachin disclosed his cancer diagnosis to the Senate in 2014, he had been undergoing chemotherapy treatment during the legislative session without even telling his staff.

"He went to chemo without ever saying a word, without ever missing a vote," recalled Abbi Easter, his self-described "chief of staff" then and a longtime political consultant, aide and friend.

"He went to chemo but still put his constituents and the Senate first," Easter said Friday. "It was unbelievable what he did."

And, by his legacy — she said — continues to do.

McEachin at rest, but his work carries on

Rep. Donald McEachin, D-4th, was laid to rest earlier this month, but his work on behalf of Virginia's [4th Congressional District](#) remains alive in an omnibus spending bill that the U.S. House of Representatives passed on Friday.

McEachin, who [had just won](#) a fourth term weeks before his sudden death on Nov. 28, won the inclusion of almost \$38 million in funding for 15 community projects in the district — from replacing a section of decaying water main in Petersburg to boosting innovative programs at Virginia Union University and Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

The \$1.7 trillion spending bill ensures that the federal government will continue operating through the rest of the fiscal year, but it also includes \$2 million he sought to rehabilitate the former Central Gardens school building in Henrico County to become the headquarters of the Henrico Police Athletic League; \$3 million to extend a north-south line for Richmond's Pulse bus rapid transit system; and \$3.2 million to upgrade Petersburg's emergency public safety communications system.

"I am so pleased my husband's work will be reflected in the congressional district for years to come as his community project funding proposals were all included and funded in the Omnibus bill that just passed," said McEachin's widow, Colette, in a statement.

"I know how very important improving the lives of his constituents and communities was to him so I am glad to see this final reflection of his work and efforts."

McEachin wasn't the only Virginia congressional representative to advocate successfully for community project funding in the package, but he always expressed pride in winning federal support for the 15 localities he represents in a district that extends from Richmond through Southside to the North Carolina line.

The package includes money for a traffic roundabout in Prince George County, a planned water and sewer upgrade in Charles City County, and extending sewer service to land zoned for industry and economic development in Greenville County.

It has money for sidewalks and other improvements for pedestrians in Hopewell and Emporia, and previously

announced aid to Richmond International Airport to replace its aircraft rescue and firefighting station.

The U.S. Senate passed the package on Thursday with support from Sen. Mark Warner and Sen. Tim Kaine, both Virginia Democrats. With House passage, it will now go to President Joe Biden for approval before the end of the Congress.

It wasn't the only postmortem victory for McEachin this week. The Senate voted on Wednesday to adopt the Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Act, a measure that McEachin had introduced and guided through the House.

The legislation, now on Biden's desk, directs the Secretary of the Interior to evaluate the Great Dismal Swamp for designation as a National Heritage Area.

"The Great Dismal Swamp is a natural treasure and tells an important story about the rich history and contributions of Native and African Americans in Virginia," Warner and Kaine said in a statement on Wednesday.

"We're especially grateful for the leadership of our dear friend and colleague, Donald McEachin, who long fought to get this bill across the finish line so that the Great Dismal Swamp and its history can be appreciated by generations to come."