

**Q& A with Bill Lofy, author of  
*Paul Wellstone:  
The Life of a Passionate Progressive***

While visiting Paul Wellstone's son Mark during Thanksgiving break from college, Bill Lofy met Wellstone and his wife Sheila. Inspired by his meeting with Wellstone, Lofy went on to work for him.

After Wellstone's untimely death in a plane crash during his campaign for reelection, Lofy began work on a biography of the senator. The result is a fast-paced and readable account of Wellstone's life and work, and an indispensable guide for anyone concerned about politics today. Wellstone was a person alive with the courage of his convictions. "Passion, joy, and the ability to deliver results," Lofy observes, are Wellstone's legacies. "He was a political leader who was able to compromise in order to get things done, but who never capitulated. He found great joy in politics, debate, and policy formulation, and he relished his friendships with people of all political ideologies."

Here, Bill Lofy talks about his book, his relationship with Wellstone as a friend and colleague, and the meaning of Wellstone's political life and legacy.

**University of Michigan Press: Tell us a bit about yourself.**

**Bill Lofy:** I'm a native Minnesotan, born and raised in southern Minnesota. My dad is a former Jesuit priest and my mom a former nun; I'm the youngest of three kids. I come from a family of political and social activists. I went to college at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where I became close friends with Mark Wellstone, Paul and Sheila's younger son. After graduating, I worked for Wellstone in his 1996 re-election campaign. I then spent two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in West Africa. When I returned, I went to work for Wellstone again, prior to going to graduate school for international development. I received my master's degree from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. I am currently the communications director for Wellstone Action, a non-profit political training and advocacy organization dedicated to carrying on Paul Wellstone's work.

**UMP: You knew Paul Wellstone. Why did you decide to write a book about his life and work?**

**BL:** Shortly after the plane crash, I was trying to resume my graduate studies in international development. I was distracted and unmotivated, and considered taking a leave of absence from school. When I went to discuss this with Robert Hutchings, the dean at the Woodrow Wilson School, he encouraged me to stick it out, and he suggested that I do an independent study that examined Wellstone's impact on politics. I immediately agreed, and the dean then went to the Politics department at Princeton to see if any professor would like to work with me on this project. Fortunately, Fred Greenstein, an emeritus professor and prominent presidential historian, agreed to serve as my advisor, and he immediately suggested that I had enough material to write a book about

Wellstone. The thought had never occurred to me, but here I had an incredible opportunity to work with one of the most pre-eminent political scientists in the country on a subject dear to my heart. I immersed myself in writing for the rest of the semester, and then spent the following year and a half after I had graduated writing and revising the manuscript. Greenstein and I maintained almost daily contact throughout this period.

I think what Dean Hutchings and Professor Greenstein saw in Wellstone was a compelling life story of a unique political figure who set out to be a different politician and succeeded. I had always known that Paul Wellstone was a fascinating and unique person, and once I had the confidence to write about him, the story essentially told itself.

**UMP: Describe your first meeting with Wellstone.**

**BL:** I was visiting Mark during Thanksgiving break my sophomore year in school, and it just happened that Paul and Sheila were home. When I met them, what struck me was how similar they were to my other friends' parents and to my parents. They were completely unpretentious and informal, and they immediately engaged me in a conversation about me—my interests, my background, how I liked Madison, etc. They invited me to stay for dinner. It was just incredibly easy to be with them, and I felt a strong connection to them right away.

Interestingly, my parents became very close friends of the Wellstones over the years—a friendship that grew out of my relationship with them, but took on a life of its own. Their loss was devastating for my mom and dad.

**UMP: At the time you met Wellstone at his house during the Thanksgiving break, you described yourself as a "bored nineteen-year-old art-history major." What motivated you then to ask Wellstone's wife Sheila if there was a volunteer position in his office?**

**BL:** Good question. It was as if a switch went off—I had always had a passion for politics and public service, something I inherited from my mother (who, by the way, had worked with Wellstone in the 1980s on a gay rights issue in southern Minnesota). The reason I was bored with school was that the subject matter wasn't interesting to me anymore, and not directly relevant to my life. I didn't realize that until I met Paul and Sheila.

I knew I needed a break from school, and I thought, "what a great way to figure out what I want to: start working with these great people, who made me feel so welcome in their home." I wanted to work for Paul mostly because I felt personally drawn to him and Sheila, not because I saw this as my eventual vocation. But once I started working for him, my passion for politics was really ignited.

**UMP: You say in the book that the most important thing Wellstone taught you was how to pay attention to people. Can you explain?**

**BL:** He just had an incredible capacity to listen to people and empathize with what is happening in their lives. When we went places, he *saw* people that I would ignore—the janitors, the cafeteria workers, the security guards—and he recognized their dignity. It's a very powerful thing to watch someone be recognized and thanked for their everyday work—to see the look on the faces of cafeteria workers when Paul went in the kitchen and thanked every one of them. . . .and then stayed for 10 minutes to ask them about their jobs, their families, their lives. It opened up a whole new world of people to me and made me much more hopeful about our democracy. There are so many good people in our country—people who will never have biographies written about them.

**UMP: In your opinion what is Paul Wellstone's greatest legacy?**

**BL:** Passion, joy, and the ability to deliver results. Wellstone was a political leader who was able to compromise in order to get things done, but he never capitulated. He found great joy in politics, debate, and policy formulation, and he relished his friendships with people of all political ideologies.

The other part of his legacy was his ability to inspire. He was an empowering leader who helped people become their own leaders. Wellstone Action, the organization I work for, is continuing that by training people in the nuts and bolts of politics, using the Wellstone model. We've trained thousands of activists who were inspired by Wellstone's example—that's a powerful legacy to leave for future generations.

**UMP: It's always difficult to speculate on what might have been, but if he were alive today, what would Paul Wellstone be concerned and engaged with?**

**BL:** He'd be fighting the Republicans in the Senate like hell. He'd be outraged at his party's lack of resolve on the major issues, and he'd be at the center of the debate in Washington.

There was an event in Washington recently that raised money for a Wellstone memorial. Senator Tom Harkin started his comments saying, "I miss Paul Wellstone now more than ever. Without him, we have no one to remind us of our core convictions."

I think all the time about what Paul would be saying on any number of issues in Washington. Almost always, I can hear him saying, "The Democrats are a bunch of chickenshits! Why the hell won't they *fight*?"

**UMP: Talk a bit about one of the central themes for Wellstone—that people who sacrifice in society don't have a voice. How did this affect his politics as a senator?**

**BL:** It defined his politics as senator—his passion and willingness to take on a powerful opposition, his legislative work, his constituent service work back in Minnesota. But the best illustration was his insistence on holding up the work of others and not shining the spotlight on himself as senator. He constantly tried to publicize the good work of other individuals and organizations that he cared about.

In his campaigns, Wellstone often talked about how it was true that the oil companies and pharmaceutical companies didn't like him very much, but that's just fine with him—they already have great representation in Washington. It was the people who can't afford to hire a lobbyist that need representation, and that, essentially, is how he saw his role in the Senate.

**UMP: As a professor, Wellstone was quite an activist. How did his academic work prepare him for his later political life?**

**BL:** His academic work didn't prepare him very well for the Senate, but his organizing work did. He learned how to organize when he was a professor, and he applied those organizing skills to electoral politics with great success. It was a radical notion that you could win an election by focusing on grassroots organizing instead of massive television ad campaigns. He would never have won office had he not honed his organizing skills for two decades prior to his run for Senate.

**UMP: How do Wellstone's life and work fit into the contemporary political context, and what is happening in politics today?**

**BL:** At a time when conservative politicians have not only won elections but built a movement on the idea of standing up for what you believe, Democrats and liberals would do well to follow Wellstone's example. He won elections not despite his strongly held beliefs, but because of them. People didn't always agree with Wellstone, but they appreciated his honesty and liked the fact that they knew where he stood on the issues.

**UMP: Do you have political aspirations of your own?**

**BL:** No, at least not now. Having worked so closely with Wellstone and other political figures over the years, I've seen the immense toll it takes on one's personal life. I'm very committed to public service, but I don't have the energy or interest right now in spending five days a week door knocking or spending my weekends going to bean feeds and walking in parades. Maybe someday, but not anytime soon.

**Bill Lofy is Communications Director of Wellstone Action, the foundation created to carry on Paul and Sheila Wellstone's legacy after their death. Lofy was also a friend and confidante of the senator. This is his first book.**