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## Growing Up an Outsider

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He who lives “for” politics makes politics  
his life, in an internal sense.

FOR SOMEONE WHO considered himself a Washington outsider even after he had mastered the system, Paul David Wellstone was born in the most unlikely of places—the nation’s capital. Born on July 21, 1944, at George Washington Hospital in Washington, D.C., to Minnie and Leon Wellstone, he grew up in the Washington suburb of Arlington, Virginia. His mother was a school cafeteria worker, and his father was a struggling writer and government bureaucrat. Both were in their forties when Wellstone was born.

Wellstone’s father, born as Leon Wexelstein, immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine when he was seventeen. He received a scholarship to study mathematics at the University of Washington, leaving Russia in 1914, three years before the Bolshevik Revolution. He would never see

his parents again. “When the Bolsheviks took over, his parents told him, ‘don’t come,’” Paul later recalled.<sup>1</sup> Wexelstein’s parents later disappeared during a wave of Stalinist purges.

Upon graduation, Wexelstein worked briefly as an electrical engineer in Seattle, but he quickly realized that his true passion was for writing. He moved to New York to pursue a career as a writer, a goal that eluded him throughout his life. In New York he met and fell in love with Misha Danashevsky (known by her family as Minnie), the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine. They married and moved to Boston, where Minnie gave birth to their first son, Stephen, in 1936, and Leon landed a job writing editorials for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. After experiencing what Paul later called “virulent anti-Semitism” in Boston, Leon changed his last name to Wellstone.<sup>2</sup> A column he wrote about Justice Louis Brandeis of the Supreme Court attracted the attention of Harvard law professor and future justice Felix Frankfurter, who wrote Leon a laudatory note. When the *Boston Evening Transcript* shut down, Frankfurter helped him get a job as a writer in the Commerce Department in Washington, D.C. Accompanied by his wife and four-year-old Stephen, he moved to Arlington, Virginia, in September 1940.

Leon Wellstone enjoyed Washington, but despite his impressive background—he was fluent in several languages, was an accomplished mathematician, and wrote prolifically—he spent a career languishing in mid-level bureaucratic jobs. According to Eleanor Fullerton, a close family friend from Arlington, “Leon wrote many different books under different names . . . and he submitted plays in many places. He got many, many rejections.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the repeated disappointments, he continued writing into old

age, producing dozens of boxes of essays, plays, and books, nearly all of which went unpublished.

Leon spent his evenings at home, in front of a typewriter, writing journals and essays in which he expressed dismay at the state of the world, his shortcomings as a writer, his fear of death, and the issues of the day. From his writings, a picture emerges of an erudite, ponderous, and deeply troubled man. "Nobody knows me," he wrote in his journal in 1941, three years before Paul's birth. "So far I am like a guest who has not presented his visiting card, so no one knows he is around. They will know I am alive when I present my visiting card—my books."<sup>4</sup> But his books never found a publisher, and Leon slid into a depression that seemed to grip him for much of his life. Paul Wellstone said that his father "was someone who seemed very sad about the world."<sup>5</sup>

Wellstone spent several years at the Commerce Department, never giving up on his dream of becoming the next Chekhov. He left Commerce after being offered a job at the Voice of America, where he wrote anticommunist propaganda in the Russian language. Eventually, he landed at the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which was then headed by Edward R. Murrow. He remained at the USIA until his retirement. "I remember visiting his office once," Paul told a reporter. "He was in a row of many. He didn't have any big position, and he certainly didn't have any big income."<sup>6</sup>

Leon Wellstone was a constant source of embarrassment for young Paul. "By age and appearance," Wellstone wrote of his father, "he just didn't fit in."<sup>7</sup> He was disheveled, absent-minded, and consumed with his intellectual pursuits. "Leon could never even change the fuses in his fuse box," recalled Eleanor Fullerton. "I think he was almost afraid of electricity . . . and this is from a man who had graduated in electrical engineering."<sup>8</sup> A social misfit with few friends and

little understanding of his son's childhood interests, Leon tried to be a strong presence in young Paul's life, often with disappointing results. Wellstone recalled being embarrassed when his father would show up at his athletic events, standing alone in a trench coat and hat.

While Leon was taciturn and aloof, Minnie Wellstone was outspoken and indignant. She grew up on New York's Lower East Side, the middle daughter of a lower-class Jewish immigrant family. Her father worked as a laborer and a "junk man," going around with a horse and wagon and collecting and selling discarded items found in people's trash. Her grandfather was a garment factory worker and labor organizer who once took his granddaughter to hear the Socialist Party presidential candidate and firebrand Eugene V. Debs. Her poor upbringing and experiences with anti-Semitism led her to deeply resent the wealthy and powerful. As a youth, Paul Wellstone did not share his mother's concern for the downtrodden. In fact, Minnie's job as a cafeteria worker at Williamsburg Junior High was a source of humiliation for young Paul. "Kids would make fun of these low-income, working class women—especially their looks and the way they talked," Paul said. "I didn't want my friends to know that they were making fun of my mother."<sup>9</sup>

At home, Minnie told her son that there was no shame in being part of the working class. "My mother's highest tribute to a person would be, 'she's a good worker,' or 'he's a good worker,'" Paul said. "It was always important to her that people work and also that people worked under decent conditions. She was always reading the papers and interested in what was going on in the country, and she and my dad would talk about it."<sup>10</sup> Despite their lack of financial means, Minnie was always looking out for her friends and neighbors. "Minnie was—and I used to tell her this—the best

Christian in this neighborhood, and she was the only Jewish person in this neighborhood,” said Eleanor Fullerton. “Anybody who was sick, she was right there with a pie or a cake or something. She was right there to help.”<sup>11</sup>

Reflecting on his childhood, Wellstone said that his parents’ commitment to social justice was rooted in their Jewish faith. His father had been raised an Orthodox Jew, and his mother grew up in a predominantly Jewish tenement neighborhood in New York City. Both encountered anti-Semitism as children. “[Leon’s] dad was a hatter, and he had a store and over and over again [Russian] troops would come in and destroy his business,” Wellstone said. Minnie Wellstone, according to her friend Eleanor Fullerton, was particularly sensitive about religious discrimination. “She used to tell me, ‘You don’t know. You don’t remember. I remember seeing signs in banks that said NO JEWS OR CATHOLICS NEED APPLY HERE,’” Fullerton recalled. “She said prejudice was so bad.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite strongly identifying themselves as Jews, the Wellstones did not practice their religion as adults. Paul did not have a bar mitzvah or formal religious training and once had to insist that his parents take him to synagogue, a visit that turned out to be disastrous. “Unfortunately that day the rabbi was raising money, and they were asking people to subscribe,” Eleanor Fullerton said. “And that made a very bad impression on Minnie and Leon and Paul.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the Wellstone home was steeped in Jewish tradition. Referring to the great Jewish theologians, Wellstone said, “I was raised on Abraham Heschel and Buber.”<sup>14</sup> His father spoke fluent Yiddish and Hebrew and frequently spoke both languages around the house (he also spoke German, French, Russian, Spanish, and some Balkan languages). Wellstone’s parents taught their son that his faith was necessarily connected to a struggle for justice. “I think the prophetic tradi-

tion of our faith is that to love God is to love justice," he told a Jewish newspaper.<sup>15</sup>

### *A Family Transformed*

When Paul was eleven years old, his family experienced a trauma from which Leon and Minnie would never fully recover. Stephen Wellstone was starting his freshman year at Antioch College when he suffered a complete mental breakdown. A psychiatrist told the Wellstones that the only chance for restoring Stephen's health was to put him in a top hospital, so they decided to mortgage their house and check Stephen into the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at Johns Hopkins University. Stephen's condition worsened, and after a year the Wellstones could no longer afford to pay the hospital bills. He was transferred to the less expensive Virginia State Mental Institution, where he languished for another year. Wellstone's parents spent the rest of their lives repaying the bills from his brother's two-year hospitalization.

Stephen's breakdown and subsequent hospitalization was, as Wellstone described it years later, "a radicalizing experience."<sup>16</sup> He witnessed the stigmatization of mental illness and the devastating impact of his brother's breakdown on his family. Wellstone visited his brother throughout his hospitalization and would later describe the horrific conditions: "decrepit buildings, patients in institutional uniforms sitting on benches or wandering aimlessly."<sup>17</sup> Minnie and Leon were overwhelmed. "Minnie had the saddest big brown eyes," Eleanor Fullerton said. "You'd look at them and they always had tears that you could almost see. And Leon always felt guilty that he hadn't paid enough attention to Stephen when he was a child."<sup>18</sup> The experience was "the

worst time in my life,” Wellstone once told a reporter. “It was just an awful several years.”<sup>19</sup>

Stephen’s breakdown came at a particularly formative time in Paul’s life. He was just entering adolescence and had demonstrated tremendous potential as a student and a leader. In his sixth grade report card, his teacher wrote, “Paul has shown fine qualities of leadership. When he leads the class discussions he is at ease, talks well and participates freely.” By nearly all measures, he was a model student, excelling at reading, spelling, math, and social studies. He had a particular talent for athletics. “Paul enjoys and eagerly takes part in all our creative and recreational activities,” his teacher reported. “He possesses a keen sense of fair play and good sportsmanship.”<sup>20</sup>

But the following year, Paul’s grades began to drop, and he fell in with a group of troublemakers. He became angry and resentful that his brother’s illness had consumed his parents’ attention. With Leon and Minnie gone most weekends to visit Stephen, Paul began a precipitous fall into juvenile delinquency. A head shorter than the other kids and embarrassed by his short stature, he took out his frustrations by rebelling. “I was a short kid with a chip on my shoulder,” he said.<sup>21</sup> He sought to prove his physical strength by picking fights with the kids who made fun of him. “I was a mixed-up kid—stealing cars, getting into trouble—one step, really, from reform school,” he was to write.<sup>22</sup> From the age of eleven to fourteen, Wellstone was a young man whose life had become unhinged.

### *A New Passion*

In the fall of 1959, Wellstone discovered the sport of wrestling. It was a perfect outlet for the tough fifteen-year-

old, allowing him to channel his aggression and turn what had been a source of humiliation—his height—into a great asset. Short and muscular, he overpowered his opponents with his strength and demonstrated the fierce competitiveness that would become his trademark. He was a smart wrestler, quick to capitalize on an opponent's weakness and careful not to make himself vulnerable. He reveled in the grittiness of the sport and its lack of pretension and felt at home in the world of wrestling.

Wrestling had a profound and enduring impact on Wellstone's life. Bill Lamb, a wrestling coach and friend of Wellstone's, describes it as one of the most physically, emotionally, and mentally challenging sports. "It's just you and the other person," he said. "It's man on man, and it affects your masculinity, it affects your pride. It affects everything about you." Wrestling certainly affected everything about Wellstone. Disciplined by his new passion, he became a multi-sport athlete, excelling in both wrestling and long-distance running. Both sports gave Wellstone an opportunity to prove himself as an individual. "I think one of the things that attracted him [to wrestling and running] was that he got the credit, and if he didn't do well he had himself to blame," Lamb continued. "But he could deal with that because he had a chance to prove who he really was, and Paul always wanted those kinds of challenges."<sup>23</sup> Wellstone quickly became Yorktown High School's best wrestler, making it to the Virginia state tournament three consecutive years.

It was during his years as a wrestler that Wellstone began demonstrating a trait that would reappear throughout his life: an ability to come from behind and win. He enjoyed being the underdog and studied his opponents' strengths as carefully as their weaknesses. He would use their strength to

his advantage, by redirecting their force in a way that left them vulnerable to his quickness. This ability to battle back from adversity was not limited to the wrestling mat. With new confidence, he quickly turned his life around. His grades improved dramatically, and he became a model student. "Paul has consistently increased his ability. . . . may this trend continue!" reported one of his high school teachers.<sup>24</sup> In addition to getting better grades, he avoided some of the vices in which some of his friends had indulged—he had one drunken experience in high school, after which he forswore alcohol, and he never once smoked marijuana.

It was during this period that Wellstone and his father grew closer, as Paul began to appreciate his father's intellect and Leon became more involved in Paul's activities. On weeknights, the two of them sat at the kitchen table and talked. With his brother incapacitated, Paul was now assuming the role of eldest son. Perhaps compensating for his previous aloofness, Leon showered attention on his son and became increasingly involved in his life. He was a frequent presence at Paul's wrestling matches, although he eventually forced himself to stay home because he could not handle the pressure. "These matches take too much out of me, even to watch," Leon wrote in an essay about Paul's final high school match. "People who have sat next to me on the benches say that I keep pushing and elbowing as if I were wrestling myself." It was probably better that Leon wasn't there: Paul lost his final match, 1–0, and missed his last chance to win the state championship. The loss was devastating, but Paul did not go through it alone. The title of Leon's essay was "We Suffer a Blow."<sup>25</sup>

During this period, Wellstone began turning to his father for lessons in life. "We had hot tea and sponge cake," Wellstone wrote in his book *The Conscience of a Liberal*, "and I

listened to him talk about the world—all about books, ideas, writing, knowledge and education.”<sup>26</sup> Leon taught Paul how to present an argument and to defend his ideas and told his son to take advantage of his freedom of expression. “I grew up having it drummed into me that one of the things that was great about this country was the freedom and democracy,” Wellstone said. It was during this period that he realized he had the makings of a scholar and educator. “Ideas were very important to my father, so it’s not surprising that I became a teacher.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Sheila*

In addition to maturing as a young man, Wellstone fell in love. Sheila Ison was the daughter of Southern Baptists and granddaughter of coal miners. Raised in Kentucky, she grew up in a middle-class home with two siblings; she was especially close to her homemaker mother. When Sheila was a junior in high school, the Ison family relocated to Washington, D.C., a move that left her feeling isolated and far from her Southern roots. When she was sixteen, she met Paul Wellstone at a beach in Ocean City, Maryland. Despite their different backgrounds—the Jewish son of Russian immigrants and the Christian daughter of southerners—they were immediately infatuated with one another. Paul impressed Sheila with his chiseled frame and confident demeanor—she would say later that he reminded her of James Dean. Sheila charmed him with her freckles, petite good looks, and soft voice infused with a Kentucky accent. “I would say it was love at first sight,” Wellstone said. “I was always pretty shy with girls, but from the time I first met Sheila there was just something there.”<sup>28</sup>

Paul and Sheila dated during their final year of high

school but went on to attend different colleges. He was accepted to the University of North Carolina on an academic scholarship, where he joined the wrestling team. Sheila decided to return to the South, enrolling at the University of Kentucky. By the middle of their first year of college, they could no longer stand living apart. Over winter break, Paul announced to his parents that he planned on marrying Sheila and bringing her to North Carolina. "One year, and that was it," Paul said. "I just told my mother and father that this can't go on. I just miss her. I can't do it this way. And they never opposed that."<sup>29</sup>

Leon remembered it somewhat differently. In an essay entitled "I Get a New Title," he wrote about his initial reservations about Paul's decision to get married. "Upon graduation [Paul and Sheila] went to different colleges," Leon wrote, "and we figured this might cool the youngsters off. It cooled off nothing, though the winter was severe." Leon remembers Paul taking him aside during a visit home and saying, "Look, Dad. We'll get along as to money, and we're very much in love. We live in an anxious world. Why wait?"<sup>30</sup> At first, Minnie and Leon would have none of it. "They were just overwhelmed," recalled Eleanor Fullerton. "They were so very upset. Sheila was a Christian, and they were to be married in a Christian church!"<sup>31</sup> Sheila's parents were also members of a local country club that had no Jewish members, a fact that particularly angered Minnie. But the Wellstones relented, knowing that Paul was certain about the decision. Leon said that after getting used to the idea he was "delighted" at what turned out to be a "positive and epochal" moment in his life. Besides, he wrote, "It was an unstoppable situation anyway."<sup>32</sup> Eight months later, shortly after Paul and Sheila had turned nineteen, they married.

In the fall of 1963, the Wellstones settled into a thirty-nine-year marriage. In North Carolina, Sheila got a job as a library assistant at the university, while Paul resumed what had become a rigorous academic and wrestling schedule. The Wellstones' domestic life was decidedly traditional. Although Sheila supported them financially, she assumed the role of supportive wife. "Sheila was humble and graceful and she saw her role as the person that supported Paul," said Dianne Stimson, whose husband, Jim, was a classmate of Paul's. "She was ferocious about a family and was insecure because she didn't have a college education. It wasn't that she wasn't deep and intelligent and complex . . . she just saw her role more behind the scenes."<sup>33</sup> It was a role that she was to play for another two decades, as a wife and mother of three. "One of the great ironies of Paul Wellstone is that he was a radical that led one of the most conservative sorts of lives," said Sam Kaplan, who was, along with his wife, Sylvia, a longtime political supporter and friend of the Wellstones.<sup>34</sup> Yet Sheila was hardly a submissive housewife. "Paul deferred to her even in the earliest days of their marriage," Dianne Stimson said. "I don't know of a couple that was more perfect than the two of them."<sup>35</sup>

The early years of their marriage were chaotic. For financial reasons, Paul had decided to finish college in three years and took more than a full load of classes. He worked two jobs, as a grocery store clerk and as the director of intramural sports at the university. His primary focus, however, was wrestling. "For me, it was all about athletics," Wellstone recalled. "Wrestling was my number one priority."<sup>36</sup> His college wrestling career was brief but spectacular. He went undefeated in his first season but lost in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) tournament. In his second year, he again went undefeated, but this time he captured the cham-

pionship that had eluded him in high school. In the championship match at the ACC tournament, Wellstone staged a stirring comeback victory in the final seconds. "Paul was behind and everything was looking bad," recalled his wrestling friend Bill Lamb. "But he didn't give up. He reached down one more time and did a fireman's carry, took the guy down to his back, and won the match."<sup>37</sup>

After his championship victory, Wellstone decided to end his wrestling career on top. With the pressure of school mounting, he realized that he had nothing more to prove as a wrestler and that his studies and family took priority. In fact, the Wellstone family was about to get bigger. Sheila became pregnant with their first child shortly after the end of wrestling season. The following year, she gave birth to Paul David Wellstone, who would go by the name David. Paul and Sheila were thrilled, and Paul's parents rejoiced at the addition to the family. "That they named him David was so pleasant to Minnie and Leon," Eleanor Fullerton remembered. "It was a name from the Old Testament, and Leon really believed in the Old Testament."<sup>38</sup>

In May 1965, two months after David's birth, Wellstone graduated from UNC after only three years. By age twenty, the near delinquent teenager had become a champion wrestler, husband, father, and college graduate.

### *The Making of a Political Activist*

Wellstone had also become a serious student and budding political activist. When he arrived at UNC in the fall of 1962, he had little idea of what subjects interested him; he knew only that he wanted to wrestle and be with Sheila. But the civil rights movement quickly convinced Wellstone to pursue political science as a major and piqued his interest in

political activism. At first, he and Sheila, consumed by their busy lives, watched as the civil rights movement exploded around them. "We saw it and we saw it, and we walked by and we walked by, because I didn't have the time," Wellstone said later. But after witnessing a Ku Klux Klan march in downtown Chapel Hill, the two saw no choice but to take action. "The KKK marched on town and there was a group of integrated white people and black people who were in the front of the post office and they were there in protest of segregation," he recalled. "They were beaten up and kicked, and we saw it. That moved me miles that night, because I just felt that we could no longer ignore what was going on."<sup>39</sup> Wellstone grew increasingly indignant at the treatment of blacks and scornful of the conservative establishment that supported segregation and racial prejudice. He reserved particular disdain for a conservative North Carolina radio personality named Jesse Helms, who railed against the civil rights movement in his daily commentaries on the Tobacco Radio Network.

Although Wellstone did not become a prominent civil rights activist in Chapel Hill, he nonetheless began participating in protests. He also stayed on an academic fast track after completing his undergraduate degree and decided to pursue a doctorate in political science, hoping to remain at UNC. Yet getting accepted to the UNC program would prove difficult. Despite a good academic record, Wellstone had struggled with test taking (the problem would later be diagnosed as a minor learning disability), and he received dismally low scores on the Graduate Record Examination. The university rejected his application on the grounds that he had not distinguished himself as a scholar and that he did not seem to have the ambition to become a professor.

Wellstone was enraged by the rejection. He filed a formal

protest with the admissions office, arguing that he had performed well in graduate-level courses and pointing to glowing recommendations from his professors. Wellstone had certainly taken a lesson from his initial experiences with direct action protests. He staged a sit-in at the dean's office and said he would not leave until the school reconsidered its position. Framing the issue as a clear case of injustice, he enlisted his professors to come to his defense. The strategy worked: after several days of the sit-in, the school capitulated and accepted his application. It was Wellstone's first success in protest politics.

As it turned out, the admission's office at North Carolina was right about Wellstone's lack of clarity about his career. Once admitted to the doctoral program, he seemed uncertain about why he was there. "My best memory of Paul is that he didn't really know why he was in graduate school," said his graduate school classmate and longtime friend Jim Stimson. "He wasn't comfortable with where he was going or what he was going to do."<sup>40</sup> Initially, he decided to specialize in Latin America because he particularly enjoyed a course in that area, but he quickly realized that he had little interest in being a professor of Latin American politics. As he continued his political activism, Wellstone settled on American politics as his specialization, with a particular focus on race and poverty.

It was during the writing of his dissertation that Wellstone came into his own as a political organizer. The dissertation, entitled "Black Militants in the Ghetto: Why They Believe in Violence," is an eighty-four-page description of the attitudes of ghetto residents in Durham, North Carolina. In 1966, violent protests against racial injustice had fractured the Durham community, and Wellstone went to investigate. He spent months interviewing poor African

Americans about their views of the police and local community leaders and found deep mistrust of government leaders, the overwhelming majority of whom were white. He developed friendships with many of the residents, despite their initial reluctance to speak openly with a white, Jewish graduate student from Washington, D.C. The experience had a deep impact on Wellstone's life. "When he met these poor people in Durham, who were really a very different part of his life because he was raised in a suburban environment, it changed his life," said Jim Stimson. "He reached into their lives and empathized with the way they lived, and he was a different person when he finished doing it."<sup>41</sup>

In his dissertation, Wellstone argued that ghetto residents were inclined to resort to violence and militancy because of an unwillingness of government officials to address their concerns. He rejected an argument that said the problem of militancy and rioting is simply a manifestation of psychological problems among young blacks. According to that theory, weak family structures cause young blacks to become disoriented and angry, leading them to violence and militancy. Wellstone argued that politics, not psychology, was the source of discontent among blacks in the ghetto. He asked, "Could it not be that a key variable explaining violence in the ghetto is the firm belief by ghetto residents that governmental leaders will not respond to their needs and interests?" According to his research, ghetto residents were more likely to resort to violence if they had had a "bitter personal experience with a white city official."<sup>42</sup>

The dissertation was a solid, if unremarkable, academic work. Heavily reliant on interviews, it was typical of Wellstone's later writings—qualitative and emotionally engaged rather than quantitative and analytically detached. "He was

really torn because he was trying to be a good academic but his heart wasn't really into writing a conventional dissertation in which he used statistical methods that he didn't really believe in," Jim Stimson said.<sup>43</sup> The dissertation is significant not for its contribution to academic literature on the subject but because it demonstrates Wellstone's commitment to finding *political* solutions to the problems facing urban blacks. Clearly sympathetic to the subjects of his research, many of whom believed that violence was the only redress to their problems, Wellstone looked for a solution within the system. He devoted an entire chapter of the dissertation to the need for government leaders to "give ghetto residents hope that their lives will be significantly improved." Moreover, he called on political scientists to play a more active role in the policy-making process: "Social scientists must do more policy-oriented research. We live in a real world with real problems, and if we are to have any impact at all we must make our research priorities relevant. We are all quick to criticize government programs or the lack of government programs, but we do not really utilize our training and skills toward making policy recommendations."<sup>44</sup> He seemed poised to begin an academic career that would focus on finding practical solutions to policy problems.

Yet Wellstone was hardly pursuing a conventional path on the road to becoming a professor. He was teaching courses to undergraduates and frequently involved them in protests. "Sometimes I would take the class out to the demonstrations, which greatly added to the number of protesters," he said. In addition, Wellstone became increasingly involved in local organizing drives, including a volatile strike involving the university's cafeteria workers. Since childhood, Wellstone had witnessed the stigmatization facing his mother and other cafeteria workers, and when the

workers at Lenoir Hall, UNC's main dining hall, went on strike after a wage dispute, he had an opportunity to stand up for their rights. At first, he tried to organize a boycott of the hall. When that effort failed, he tried a Saul Alinsky tactic. "There was a rule that said you had to leave the cafeteria," Wellstone later recalled. "So we would take our sweet time going through the line, sit at the tables, and just block the place up."<sup>45</sup>

By the time Wellstone received his Ph.D. in the spring of 1969, he had become an accomplished activist and organizer. Organizing provided him an outlet for his growing indignation at racial discrimination and economic injustice and a clear professional focus. With a newfound sense of purpose, he looked for jobs that would give him the opportunity to both teach and organize, and he gave little thought to producing large volumes of academic scholarship. During the job search, he received an offer to join the Political Science Department of a highly selective liberal arts college—Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. At first, he was reluctant to accept the offer. "I would have preferred staying in the south and Sheila would have too, because she's from Kentucky," Wellstone recalled. "But I think my activism in the civil rights movement hurt me at southern universities. I applied to a lot of them but I just couldn't get to first base. I came out here to interview at Carleton, and it was just one of those Minnesota days where it was 20 degrees, the sky was blue and it had just snowed, and I just loved it." At the age of twenty-four, Wellstone accepted the job. Sheila was hesitant, but Minnie and Leon approved. "When my mother heard I was going to Carleton, she said, 'That's great! Minnesota is a great state, because you don't have to be rich to take a vacation there,'" Paul said.<sup>46</sup>

*Organizing Instead of Publishing*

In the fall of 1969, Wellstone arrived in Minnesota and entered a political environment notably different from the conservatism of North Carolina. These were the glory days of Minnesota liberalism. The Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), the product of a 1943 merger between Minnesota Democrats and the influential Farmer-Labor movement, held a vice grip on power in the state. Hubert Humphrey was returning to the U.S. Senate, where he had served since 1949, after four years as vice president under Lyndon Johnson. Eugene McCarthy was completing his second and final term in the Senate, and Walter Mondale was finishing his first term as senator.

It wasn't just Minnesota that had such a long and rich tradition of progressive populism. It was the Midwest as a whole, and Wellstone would fit into that tradition, which dated as far back as the 1800s, with such leaders as the great orator William Jennings Bryan from Nebraska. In the 1920s, populists like Robert ("Fighting Bob") La Follette of Wisconsin and Floyd B. Olson of Minnesota ("very possibly the most radical figure ever to govern an American state"<sup>47</sup>) gained national prominence for their staunchly independent views, support for farmers, and relentless pursuit of progressive reform. The populists had reputations as hell-raisers ("Someone once said the populists were the sons of wild jackasses," Walter Mondale said.<sup>48</sup>) and were widely admired, even by their critics, for their courage to stand up for their beliefs. As one foe of La Follette put it after seeing him deliver an emotional speech, "I hate the son of a bitch. But my God, what guts he's got."<sup>49</sup>

Wellstone was strongly drawn to this tradition and stud-

ied the history of the Midwest progressive populists. “This whole progressive tradition, good government tradition—that people wanted an honest politics, that people would not stand for politics that was dominated by money or dishonesty, was something that really attracted me to Minnesota,” Wellstone said.<sup>50</sup> At Carleton College, he immersed himself in campus activism—organizing protests, criticizing the school’s administration for its ties to corporate interests, and speaking out on every issue, minor and major, affecting the community. “It was clear,” said Sy Schuster, one of Wellstone’s Carleton friends and colleagues, “that he was less concerned about academic political science than about political science directly servicing people’s needs.” Wellstone frequently included community service and organizing projects as part of his classroom curriculum. “In my freshman year, Wellstone assigned us to research the welfare system in rural Rice County, Minnesota,” said one of his former students, Jonathan Lange. “He took us to organizational meetings of welfare mothers, fighting to replace a food commodity program with food stamps.”<sup>51</sup>

As a teacher, Wellstone is remembered for his passion and uncommon ability to relate to his students. When he arrived at Carleton at the age of twenty-five, his students were not much younger than he was, and they viewed Wellstone, who looked, acted, and talked like them, as a contemporary. One of his students recollected being in Wellstone’s first class as a professor his freshman year:

Like me, he wore t-shirts and jeans to class and seemed to pay scant attention to the reading list he’d assigned, except that he had an amazing command of facts that he used to support his lectures, which actually were more like speeches.

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His brilliance was manifest. He was a first year teacher, so he couldn't have memorized his lectures, but he spoke without notes for an hour. He wasn't constrained by a podium, but he was predictable. Every lecture he'd start with his fingers jammed into his jeans with the thumbs hooked over the edge of the pocket, as if he were trying to restrain himself from what he must have known was coming—the inevitable rising volume, quickening cadence, and karate chopping of knowledge into our small freshman brains.<sup>52</sup>

Despite his strongly held views, Wellstone was also known for welcoming debate in his classes. As another student recalled, “Whether students were liberal or conservative didn't matter. He pushed us to think about what we could do to make change in the world.”<sup>53</sup>

As a scholar, Wellstone pursued an unconventional path. He ignored conventional “publish or perish” wisdom, which says that an untenured professor without a substantial body of published scholarly work has little hope of receiving tenure. During his first two years at Carleton, he wrote only one article for a scholarly journal. Instead of producing scholarship, he concentrated on organizing. “I was determined not to be an outside observer but to use my skills as a political scientist to empower people and to step forward with people in justice struggles,” he said later.<sup>54</sup>

### *Wellstone Discovers Alinsky*

The greatest influence on Wellstone's thinking came not from academia but from the legendary Chicago writer and organizer Saul Alinsky. Alinsky gained prominence in the 1940s with his groundbreaking organizing work that brought together previously hostile ethnic groups in

Chicago's stockyards to form a potent social justice movement. In Alinsky's view, the goal of community organizing was to contest for power by giving people a sense of participation and belonging and by delivering results. He established coalitions that served not only as pressure groups but also as service providers that established credit unions and provided social services. The key to successfully leading economic justice campaigns was to instill a sense of possibility through pragmatism.

Alinsky's 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*, is a blueprint for mobilizing the disenfranchised. The book sets forth a series of rules that "make the difference between being a realistic radical and being a rhetorical one." Most of the rules focus on the importance of using conflict as leverage in political struggles: "Ridicule is man's most potent weapon," "Keep the pressure on," and "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." But in other parts of the book, Alinsky concentrates on practical lessons, such as the necessity of having a sense of humor. "The organizer, searching with a free and open mind void of certainty, hating dogma, finds laughter not just a way to maintain his sanity but also a key to understanding life," he writes. "Humor is essential to a successful tactician."<sup>55</sup>

Wellstone learned Alinsky's lessons well. In his organizing work, he was confrontational and irreverent and embraced conflict as the central ingredient to forcing social change. But he took Alinsky's advice about maintaining a sense of humor. He is remembered as self-deprecating and jovial, with a unique talent for charming even his most vocal critics. Alinsky's writings informed Wellstone's career as both a community organizer and later a politician. He made *Rules for Radicals* required reading for his classes and even brought Alinsky to the Carleton campus to address

one of his classes. He enthusiastically embraced Alinsky's emphasis on conflict and encouraged his students and fellow organizers to engage in acts of civil disobedience if necessary. "I am an old Alinsky organizer," he once said. "I believe every community has a hierarchy of power. Your job is to shake it up."<sup>56</sup>

*Mobilizing the Rural Poor*

It was in his own community that Wellstone immediately set out to shake up the hierarchy of power. With the lessons from *Rules for Radicals* freshly in mind, Wellstone began to organize poor residents of the county in which he lived. Rice County is located about forty-five miles south of the Twin Cities and at the time was home to forty-five thousand residents and only two cities of appreciable size—Northfield (ten thousand residents) and Faribault (fifteen thousand residents). Most of the residents of Rice County live in rural areas, and most of those people are poor. What Wellstone found was a type of poverty that he believed had been ignored. "The rural poor are not heirs of a tradition of political activism and attempted organization, as are many urban communities. . . . Low income residents are isolated from one another and from more affluent sectors of the community. . . . Sanctions against rural dissidents can be effectively enforced."<sup>57</sup>

It took Wellstone little time to start mobilizing the rural poor. In 1970, just months after arriving at Carleton, he was appointed to the board of directors of a state agency called the Rice-Goodhue-Wabasha Citizens Action Council (CAC), which had been established in 1967 with the purpose of "serving the poor."<sup>58</sup> He was dismayed by what he found. Instead of incorporating the voices of the poor peo-

ple—mostly welfare mothers—the agency was controlled by local civic leaders, who Wellstone believed had little interest in giving poor people a participatory role in the organization. He decided to start organizing on his own. He taught an evening class for Head Start mothers and staff, using *Rules for Radicals* as a textbook. Over the course of a year, a growing number of the Head Start mothers began demanding a greater role in the CAC's formulation and implementation of antipoverty measures. They were repeatedly ignored and marginalized by the agency's leadership.

In June 1972, Wellstone and four others—two Carleton students, a mother of two on welfare, and the mother of a Head Start child—received a two-thousand-dollar grant from the United Church of Christ and formed the Organization for a Better Rice County (OBRC). One of the organizers called it “a two-fisted group that grapples with people's problems and gets things done.”<sup>59</sup> The OBRC gained statewide recognition for its unorthodox tactics and willingness to confront existing power structures. The organization quickly made an impact. In little over a year, the organization had, among other things, filed a formal complaint against the CAC, taken a township to court over its refusal to turn over relief records, forced a school board to replace special lunch tickets for low-income students (which unnecessarily identified them to other students) with tickets that all students used, and convinced the county board to fund a day-care center with a sliding fee scale so that low-income mothers could participate.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps the greatest impact Wellstone had, however, was on the self-esteem of the women involved in the OBRC. Patty Fritz, one of the founding members of the OBRC, was a low-income Rice County resident who had never imagined

herself a political activist until she met Wellstone. “He gave me hope in myself,” Fritz said. “He gave us tools to use.” And then, Fritz said, Wellstone got out of the way and let the OBRC members organize themselves. “He wasn’t really our leader,” she said. “There was a real human being there, who really cared about what he was talking about. He was passionate all the time about the issues that concerned him, and those were my issues, too. I could have said the same thing, he just said it better, that’s all.”<sup>61</sup> After OBRC disbanded, Fritz played an instrumental role in unionizing the nursing home where she had worked for twenty-seven years and would later become a candidate for state legislature.<sup>62</sup>

Wellstone’s work with the OBRC was consistent with the central theme of his dissertation research—power. Poverty, whether it is found in rural Minnesota or urban North Carolina, was primarily a political issue, not a result of psychology or pathology. For Wellstone, poverty could be understood when viewed in the context of a series of questions: Who sacrifices? Who decides? Who benefits? The answers were clear to him—the people who sacrifice in society do not have a voice. This was a theme to which Wellstone would return for much of his career. “Some people are very generous with other people’s suffering,” he often said.

By the end of his third year in Minnesota, Wellstone could point to an impressive list of accomplishments as an organizer. He helped raise awareness of rural poverty in Rice County, led protests against local government leaders, and trained an impressive number of students in the essentials of organizing. Above all, he enabled a cadre of poor and disenfranchised individuals to become their own leaders. “Paul wasn’t the kind of organizer who sees people as objects to be organized,” said former student Kari Moe, who would later

serve as his chief of staff. "He really made personal relationships with the folks that he sat down and had coffee with, and talked with them. He grew to love them and they grew to love him."<sup>63</sup> Yet for all his successes as an organizer, Wellstone was putting his career at risk, because Carleton hired him to teach and to be a scholar, not to organize.

### *A Career in Peril*

Wellstone's work gained the attention of Carleton's administrators, but not in the way he would have liked. They strongly disapproved of his unconventional approach to his work. In a footnote to his first book, *How the Rural Poor Got Power*, a narrative of his organizing efforts with OBRC, Wellstone wrote, "The research was attacked by various professors at Carleton on the grounds that there were no firm policy recommendations that the county commissioners and other local officials could find useful. The president of Carleton once opened a conversation with me this way: 'If I were a county commissioner I would certainly want some recommendations to go on.' The point of course was that the studies *were not for* the county commissioners."<sup>64</sup>

But in his dissertation, Wellstone had argued for precisely the type of scholarship that he was now criticizing. Five years after writing that political scientists should provide policymakers with concrete research, he was refusing to provide any policy recommendations with his academic research. Carleton and Minnesota seemed to radicalize Wellstone, and he was apparently carried away by the excitement of doing rather than studying. He reveled in the role of campus radical and delighted in angering the Carleton administration.

Carleton's political science scholars were unimpressed.

Without informing Wellstone, the department chair initiated an evaluation of his work in November 1973. Three months later, he came forth with a decision to dismiss Wellstone from the department. Accordingly, the dean sent Wellstone a terminal one-year contract.

The Carleton student body, led by a group of seniors, rallied to Wellstone's support. Within weeks of the announcement that his contract would not be renewed, a group of students formed the Committee to Reinstate Paul Wellstone, which led protests on Wellstone's behalf, gathered 790 signatures (out of a student body of 1,600) demanding the decision be reversed, and led a student boycott of courses in the political science department. The student newspaper made the firing a prominent and persistent story.

While student outrage mounted, Wellstone consulted Sy Schuster, a senior mathematics professor who had had earlier experience with academic freedom cases. Schuster opined that much of the evaluation of Wellstone's work at Carleton that began the previous November was in violation of Carleton procedures and that the process was unfair and biased. Schuster advised that the only way for Wellstone to maintain his position at Carleton was to work through the Carleton system, to prepare an appeal to the Faculty Affairs Committee that would claim that the manner in which he had been treated, and especially the evaluation, was in violation of Carleton's regulations. Wellstone resisted this advice at first, but soon agreed to mount an appeal if Schuster would be willing to act as his counsel.

In preparing the appeal, Schuster began investigating the evaluation and its background. His investigation revealed such obvious violations of school regulations that Dean Bruce Morgan realized that it might have inflicted serious

harm on the Carleton community if heard in open testimony of the already-scheduled Faculty Affairs Committee hearing. In order to head off the hearing, the dean and President Howard Swearer prevailed on the Political Science Department to “suspend” the decision on Paul Wellstone and to agree to an evaluation by two external scholars approved by the department, Wellstone, and the administration. Thus, Professor Peter Bachrach, chair of Political Science at Temple University, and Professor Ira Katznelson of Columbia University were invited to the Carleton campus to evaluate Wellstone’s teaching, scholarship, and community service; they conducted interviews with students, faculty, and administrators.

Bachrach and Katznelson wrote overwhelmingly positive assessments of Wellstone’s work, which resulted in Wellstone’s being granted tenure. Ironically, the Political Science Chair’s hopes of getting rid of Wellstone by initiating an evaluation in his fifth year led to Wellstone being granted tenure a year earlier than other faculty who proceed through the ranks according to the standard schedule specified in the school’s regulations. Wellstone was the youngest faculty member in Carleton’s history to receive tenure.