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Norm Steenstra, long-time West Virginia Citizen Action leader, dies at age 72

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Norm Steenstra, who moved to West Virginia to operate a coal mine and ended up leading one of the state’s most influential environmental organizations, died Tuesday in his Charleston home at age 72.

Steenstra played a key role in creating the [West Virginia Environmental Council](#) in the late 1980s, and served as executive director of [West Virginia Citizen Action Group](#), a nonprofit political watchdog group, from 1996 to 2007.



This is a January 1990 file photo of West Virginia environmental activist Norm Steenstra, who died Tuesday.

KENNY KEMP | Gazette-Mail file

From coal miner to activist

A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Steenstra attended Dutch Christian-affiliated schools from elementary school through college, graduating from Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with a history degree.

“Having absolutely no career aspirations led me into social work,” he said in a 2005 interview in the Charleston Gazette. After working with drug abuse agencies in New York and New Jersey for several years, Steenstra was ready for a career change. When a friend informed him he bought a small coal mine in Clay County and wanted Steenstra to run it for him, he jumped at the chance.

Steenstra, then 26, had never seen a coal mine, let alone operated one, when he arrived in West Virginia. He worked at the 18-employee underground mine for several years, before a downturn in the coal market forced it to close. He then began a successful career as a coal broker, but, “I hated it — the business world clashed with my values,” he said in the 2005 interview.

“After Norm and his first wife, Sharon, took some environmental classes at Marshall, at some point he saw a notice that West Virginia Citizen Action was looking for an environmental justice organizer,” recalled Gary Zuckett, the organization’s current director.

Steenstra applied for the job, and was the only candidate interviewed who had no previous experience working with an environmental organization, recalled David Grubb, the first director and co-founder of West Virginia Citizen Action Group, as it was then known.

“I asked why a person who worked in the coal business wanted to work for an environmental group, and he said he wanted his children to be proud of him,” said Grubb. “I thought that was some incredibly powerful motivation, so I hired him. He had a spark and a fire and a

level of motivation that was hard to beat. In the end, he did make his children proud, along with all of us who worked with him.”

Steenstra's environmental achievements

Steenstra's hiring as an environmental justice organizer made him “the first paid environmental organizer in the state,” said Zuckett. In that role, Steenstra and the newly formed Environmental Council — a statewide coalition of dozens of environmental groups — produced a report on dioxin contamination in the Kanawha River. That report led to the Environmental Protection Agency designating several tracts of land in Nitro as Superfund sites, accelerating clean-up activity.

During his time at the helm of West Virginia Citizen Action, Steenstra's achievements included helping to pass legislation that limited the dumping of out-of-state garbage in West Virginia, and establish a statewide network of recycling centers.

After retiring from West Virginia Citizen Action, Steenstra became director of the Kanawha County Solid Waste Authority, with duties that included managing the county's recycling program. During a national economic downturn in 2006-2008, the Kanawha County facility was one of only a few recycling centers to operate at a profit, due to Steenstra's creative outlook on the use of recycled materials, Zuckett said.

“He was an amazing communicator who had the ability to talk with people with very different agendas and try to find some degree of common ground,” said his son, Norman Steenstra III.

“He loved people, he loved West Virginia, and he didn’t do anything halfway,” said his wife, Beverly. “He also had an unquenchable intellectual curiosity and a wicked sense of humor.”

“Norm was a remarkable leader and mentor for many who remain active in West Virginia’s environmental movement and others who are working to create a government that is open, honest and accountable to the needs of our communities,” said Zuckett. “He leaves an outstanding legacy, but also a tremendous hole in our hearts.”

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