



Gerry Studds.

Studds, Gerry (1937-2006)

by Linda Rapp

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Representative Gerry Eastman Studds was the first member of the United States Congress to acknowledge that he was gay. During his twelve terms in the House of Representatives he was known for his accessibility to his constituents and his effective advocacy of their concerns, notably in matters of the environment, health care, and fishing and maritime issues.

Gerry Studds was the namesake of his ancestor Elbridge Gerry, vice-president under James Madison and a signer of the Declaration of Independence from Massachusetts.

Studds was born in Mineola, New York, on May 12, 1937, but grew up in Cohasset, Massachusetts, a part of the district that he would later represent.

Studds attended Yale University, from which he received a bachelor's degree in history in 1959 and a master's degree in 1961.

In the 1960s Studds was a foreign service officer in the State Department in Washington, D. C., and was also an assistant at the White House, working on a Kennedy administration initiative to establish a domestic Peace Corps. Later he became a teacher of history and government at a private school in New Hampshire.

Studds made his first run for public office in 1970, but lost to the incumbent Republican representative in a close election.

In preparation for the next campaign, Studds learned to speak Portuguese, the language of a sizable community in the district, and also studied issues related to fishing, an important industry in the area.

In his second bid for Congress, Studds was successful, defeating his well-funded opponent and becoming the first Democrat in fifty years to win what was considered a safe Republican seat.

Studds made a point of being available to his constituents, visiting all the towns in his district several times a year and holding meetings at which he discussed his votes in Congress and responded to questions from the public.

Maritime issues are of vital interest to the citizens of the Tenth District of Massachusetts, comprised of Cape Cod and adjacent areas. Studds, a member of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, worked successfully to extend the territorial waters of the United States to two hundred miles, to pass the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and to limit the drilling of oil in the Georges Bank, a prime fishing area. He also championed the refinancing of the Coast Guard in a time of budget cuts.

Studds faced controversy in 1983 when one of his former pages revealed that he had had a sexual relationship with the congressman some ten years earlier. During the course of the House Ethics Committee's investigation, Studds publicly acknowledged his homosexuality, a disclosure that, according to

an article in the *Washington Post*, "apparently was not news to many of his constituents."

In an address to the House, Studds stated, "It is not a simple task for any of us to meet adequately the obligations of either public or private life, let alone both, but these challenges are made substantially more complex when one is, as I am, both an elected public official and gay."

The House voted to censure Studds in July 1983. Although there was some adverse reaction in his district, a poll of registered voters conducted by the Quincy, Massachusetts *Patriot Ledger* revealed that 65 percent favored his remaining in office while only 28 percent thought that he should resign and 7 percent expressed no opinion.

Returned to Congress by his constituents in 1984, Studds continued to champion environmental and maritime issues. He also called for a strong federal response to the AIDS crisis, with funding for medical care and research.

Studds was among the first to endorse lifting the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military. He also supported the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, designed to end discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Studds suffered a disappointment in 1995 when the Republican-controlled Congress abolished the House Merchant Marine and Fishing Committee, of which he had been chairman.

Later that year Studds announced that he would not be running for a thirteenth term, a decision that he described as "a personal one" made in consultation with his partner, Dean Hara.

After retiring from Congress, Studds continued his commitment to environmental causes. In 2001 he presided at the opening of the interpretive Visitors Center at the Gerry E. Studds Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Studds worked for two years as executive director of the New Bedford Oceanarium, a facility still under development. He then served as a lobbyist for a Massachusetts fishermen's association.

Shortly after same-sex marriage was legalized in Massachusetts in 2004, Studds and Hara wed.

On October 3, 2006, Studds collapsed while walking his dog. On October 14, he died in a Boston hospital, the victim of a blood clot in his lung.

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