



Raymond Lesniak Continues to Get Things Done in New Jersey

By DANIEL DEVINE

May 18, 2021 at 1:56 PM



Whether you know of him or not, the retired state senator may have had the greatest impact on New Jersey of any politician in Trenton. What is he up to lately?

When you need something done in New Jersey, Ray Lesniak, 74, has a guy.

"Me," the former state senator said without hesitation.

Sign Up for Sparta Newsletter

Our newsletter delivers the local news that you can trust.

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

While still active in Trenton, Lesniak's life as a politician ended in 2018 after 40 years in the state legislature, spending the last 35 years as a senator. During that period, he led efforts to protect the environment, abolish the death penalty and provide equality for same-sex couples.

Lesniak was often out front on these and other issues, including the use of absentee ballots, which became prevalent during last November's election. New Jersey approved early voting 12 years ago.

"I was ahead on that one too," he said.

Lesniak's former colleagues recognize his contributions.

"I feel in my heart and soul, he probably had the most profound effect on legislation of anyone that's passed through those halls in Trenton," state Senator Brian Stack said during an interview. "I miss him."

Minutes from his hometown of Elizabeth, Lesniak is sipping on a glass of pinot noir at da Benito in Union. The décor resembles that of Sardi's, the iconic New York City restaurant where the walls are covered by celebrity caricatures. Inside da Benito, the walls are decorated with photographs of notable patrons.

Lesniak appears in three of those pictures. Super Bowl-winning coach Bill Parcells and actor Al Pacino appear in two.

In person, Lesniak has a friendly face, almost free of wrinkles, even when smiling. He has bright eyes and well-coiffed, silver hair. A state senate pin adorns his jacket's lapel.

"Once a senator, always a senator," he said.



Ray Lesniak, Ristorante da Benito Italian restaurant, Union. 2021. Daniel Devine.

He now serves as special counsel to Democrats in the upper house of the legislature. Senate President Stephen Sweeney hired him in 2020, [characterizing](#) Lesniak as a "brilliant lawmaker." His current focus in this new role is to help formulate tax incentives aimed at retaining or attracting companies to New Jersey.

Lesniak also volunteers to testify in Trenton on issues that are important to him, including the crating of pigs. The practice, which involves locking a sow in a narrow metal crate during pregnancy to facilitate feeding, has been [shown](#) to cause harm to the animals.

"You've got to respect somebody who cares that much about pigs," state Senator Stack said.

Lesniak's career was influenced by his late wife Salena Carroll Lesniak. The couple married in 2018 after dating for 20 years. Salena was his "biggest critic and my biggest cheerleader," Lesniak said, his smile disappearing, his bright eyes dimming.



Ray and Salena Lesniak. Courtesy of Lesniak family.

Like Lesniak, Salena worked for New Jersey. She was an aide for another legislator when they met, and eventually served as chair of the New Jersey Civil Rights Commission. The couple was active in the public domain, including [hosting](#) one of the state's first gay marriages.

Salena Carroll Lesniak died suddenly of unknown causes on the morning of July 3, 2019, at the couple's beach home in Brick. She was 43.

Lesniak has not recovered from Salena's death.

"The only thing that would shake me to my soul is that I wouldn't want to be governor without Salena," Lesniak said, referencing his defeat at the hands of Governor Phil Murphy in the 2016 gubernatorial primary. "That's how much she was a part of my life."

Jay Lassiter, a journalist at [InsiderNJ](#) and friend of the couple, remembers the couple with admiration.

"People should learn from the Lesniak model," Lassiter said, voice rising, about their age gap, decision not to have children and ability to wait so long to get married.

"Often the unconventional makes the greatest love story," Lassiter said. "And the Lesniaks had one of the most beautiful relationships Trenton has ever known."

In addition to Salena, Lesniak, labeled a liberal Democrat, also had good relationships with leading Republicans, which today may seem equally unconventional.

His [work with former Governor Thomas H. Kean](#) is one example of his ability to reach across the aisle.

"When we had confrontations, we worked them out," Lesniak said. "We trusted each other, which is something that's often lacking in not only public life, but in life in general."

Thirty years onward, Lesniak worked with state Senator Thomas H. Kean, Jr.

"For Ray, it was always about an issue he was passionate about, and it was always about people," Kean Jr. said in an interview. "He kept his word, always."

Lesniak didn't always get along with others in Trenton, including very [public battles](#) with former Governor Chris Christie.

One photograph of Christie can be found during a quick search at da Benito. While not as many as Lesniak, it does put the former governor in a tie with Frank Sinatra.

Outside of politics, Lesniak is particularly proud of the Raymond J. Lesniak Recovery High School in Union, established to help students with substance use disorders. He became active on the issue after a harrowing personal experience.

"At 2:30 a.m., I woke up with two guys standing over my bed. I hear, 'Shoot him,'" Lesniak said of two men who broke into his Elizabeth home in 2009.

"Stay cool, we're not going to hurt you; we're good people just in a bad place right now," the second man said, according to Lesniak.

"That really inspired me to get into recovery," Lesniak said. "They robbed me, got high, and got arrested. I testified on their behalf." One defendant was sentenced to four years in jail, based in part on prior criminal convictions. The second man was sentenced to drug counseling and probation; a chance to recover.

Back at home, Lesniak is finishing his memoir, with former U.S. President Bill Clinton providing the foreword.

Lesniak also follows the men's and women's basketball teams of his alma mater, Rutgers, both of which made their respective NCAA championship tournaments this past March. Both teams lost in heartbreaking fashion.

"I think they were just tired," Lesniak said, about the teams, not himself.



Ray Lesniak serves as honorary coach in Rutgers basketball team huddle, with renowned coach C. Vivian Stringer. Courtesy Lesniak family.

Commenting more broadly on how teams win titles, "Defense wins games, offense wins championships," Lesniak said.

When asked if the same could be said about his career, "No doubt," Lesniak said without hesitation.