

Friends and family are recalling former State Sen. Edgar May as a dedicated public servant and a champion for the disadvantaged.

May - a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who became a liberal voice in Vermont politics - died Thursday at 83.

May had a long and varied career, one that made him a confidante of the Kennedys and took him to the heights of the Johnson Administration .



Edgar May in 2008, taken in Burlington at the recording of a StoryCorps segment for NPR. VPR

But he started as a newspaper reporter. In 1961, he won the Pulitzer Prize as a reporter for the Buffalo Evening News for an investigation of the welfare system in New York State.

His sister, former Vermont Gov. Madeleine May Kunin, said her brother posed as a case worker to get the story.

"He really had a passion for improving people's lives. He was dedicated to public service," she said.

Kunin said May had suffered a stroke about three weeks ago. He died in Tuscon, Ariz., where he maintained a winter home.

She said her brother advocated for the disadvantaged throughout his career.

"He had a warmth about him in relating to people. And he loved politics but it wasn't his whole life. And I think he made a really large contribution," she said. "And on a personal level, he was my big brother."

May was born in Switzerland and came to the United States when he was ten years old. In a 2008 StoryCorps interview, Kunin and May talked about their arrival in New York in 1940 as Jewish refugees fleeing the growing Holocaust in Europe.

"It was a ship built for 900 passengers and there were 2,000 passengers many of them refugees like us on that ship," May said. "And I remember early that morning our mother had us go out on deck. And there appeared the Statue of Liberty out of this fog. And all of sudden everybody on deck - there must have been hundreds of people on deck - started to applaud and yell and shout."

May was a Democrat and served in the Vermont House during the 1970s as a representative from Springfield. He was elected to the state Senate in 1982 and served for eight years, including as chair of the Appropriations Committee. Vermont Congressman Peter Welch was Senate President at the time. He says May had the harder job overseeing passage of the state budget.

"He had a legislative skill that is rare. He would know what needed to happen by the end of the session. And I'd see him in the cafeteria talking to somebody in January and wonder why. And it would make sense three months

later," Welch said. "He'd be bringing somebody into the discussion getting them involved and setting it up so we could cooperate and get things done. And boy, his skills are certainly in short supply in the nation's capital."

After he retired from politics May maintained his involvement in civic life. He spearheaded an effort in Springfield to build a community health and recreation center, a facility that now bears his name. Springfield lawyer George Lamb says May was the inspiration behind the project as well as its chief fundraiser and organizer.

"Phrases like larger than life are perhaps over-used but not as pertains to Edgar. He was indeed. And Edgar had difficulty taking no for an answer. As he told me many times that was not in his vocabulary as far as building the center in Springfield," Lamb said.

May did not want the center to be an exclusive place that only the well-off could afford. So it has a sliding fee scale and a scholarship program to make it accessible to all.

"He told us all many times, 'I'm building this center so people can be on the inside looking out and not on the outside looking in,'" Lamb said.

Former Gov. Kunin says May's experience as an immigrant left him with a deep appreciation for the American dream.

May himself attributed that life lesson to his mother. He said she spoke to both children when their ship landed in New York.

"And I think both Madeleine and I remember what she said,' She said, 'This is America. Anything is possible in America,'" May said

Friends and family said May lived fully that life of infinite possibilities.

Listen to an audio slideshow of Edgar May and his sister, Madeleine May Kunin, from 2008 done for StoryCorps.

