



Joe Allen with Mickey Leland

Leland legacy still inspires

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Twenty-five years ago, Houston - and the United States - lost a powerful voice for the poor and the disenfranchised when U.S. Rep. Mickey Leland died in a plane crash in Ethiopia on a mission to help starving Sudanese refugees. The news of his death at the age of 44 stunned all who knew of him, but that he died trying to help others did not.

From his beginnings as a community activist in the Fifth Ward to his years in Austin and Washington as an elected official, he worked to expand health care availability, get food to the hungry, increase minority involvement in industries such as energy and telecommunications and to extend a helping hand in other countries.

He fought apartheid in South Africa and launched international programs against Vitamin A deficiencies in malnourished children.

As chairman of the House Select Committee on Hunger, he pushed through aid to fight famine in Africa, including for the refugees he was en route to visit when his plane, with 15 others aboard including his chief of staff Patrice Johnson, crashed into an Ethiopian mountain on Aug. 7, 1989.

Despite his premature death, Leland left a political legacy worth emulating, one of "compassion for the underdog," as his former staffer and now State Sen. Rodney Ellis described it, and of political civility, a lost art in the modern era.

"Even people who disagreed with him philosophically liked him personally, and that's something that's sorely missing in politics today," Ellis said.

Also worth emulating was his commitment to service, to the work of helping others. Leland lived his life in the service of an ever-expanding community - Houston, Texas, the United States and, eventually, the world - and urged people to join him. It may seem like a quaint notion today, but he tried in his own way to make the world a better place.

The best way to honor George Thomas (Mickey) Leland is by continuing that work.