

A Tribute to Bruce Romer
By Academy Fellow Beth Kellar

Bruce Romer was competent and confident, yet unassuming. He did not seek the limelight and was skilled in supporting those who were in front of the cameras. He was gracious and generous to all, whether helping a friend, mentoring a young (or not so young) professional, and sharing his knowledge and experience. In short, Bruce personified public service.

He was wise in giving advice and in dealing with gnarly issues. He was a good listener and a bridge builder. People respected and trusted him.

Bruce understood the value of networks and building strong relationships. He served for 12 years as Montgomery County's Chief Administrative officer, managing operations for Maryland's largest local government. He also served as city manager of Rockville, Maryland, Davenport, Iowa, Sidney, Ohio, and Brighton, Michigan. He rose to leadership positions in many organizations, including the Maryland City/County Management Association, the Maryland Municipal League, the International City/County Management Association, the National Association of Counties, the Greater Washington Board of Trade, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC).

Bruce was president of ICMA in 2000-2001, a period fraught with challenges for all levels of government after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Communication and coordination were critical issues. NAPA Fellow Ron Carlee, Arlington County Manager at the time, recalls that the leaders of the primary responding agencies (Arlington County Fire Department, FBI, Department of Defense) knew and respected each other so they quickly created a unified command.

But there were other gaps that surfaced, including a lack of coordination over evacuation and transportation decisions. NAPA Fellow Anthony Griffin, then Fairfax County Manager, became the chair of the CAO group for the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOC) after Bruce was elected ICMA President.

Griffin remembers the value of the CAO network in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attack. It took three hours to set up the first CAO conference call after the attack. By the end of the day, the CAOs had a second call and agreed to take the same actions: (1) request that superintendents close schools and (2) keep all other local government

operations up and running. The group soon set up a system that allowed telephone connections within minutes.

When Bruce passed away, he was working for WAMU. In an online article, WAMU quoted Doug Duncan, the Montgomery County elected executive who had hired Bruce to serve as his CAO:

“He was very unassuming, very modest, and really saw his role as supporting the elected officials that had hired him. And his job was to make them look good. He is the finest public servant I have ever known. We’ve had many people who say he’s the best boss they ever had.”

In addition to his many responsibilities for Montgomery County and the region, Bruce had another tough decision to make as the president of ICMA. Should ICMA go forward with its annual conference in Salt Lake City? The airports were closed and many people were afraid to fly. Bruce and ICMA Executive Director Bill Hansell decided it was important to set an example and to demonstrate that terrorists could not shut the country down. They felt that bringing local government managers together from around the world demonstrated strength and would provide opportunities for local leaders to learn from terrorism and security experts from around the world, including Israel.

As a dedicated public servant, Bruce understood the importance of ethics education and enforcement as essential to instill trust and confidence in government. He made ethics a priority during his long career in the public and private sectors.

He served as chair of ICMA’s ethics committee when he was Vice President and then President of the Association. During his ten years as Vice President for Administration at Westat, Inc, he was a member of the company’s corporate level Ethics Compliance Committee. And as a volunteer, he was serving as the chair of Montgomery County’s Ethics Commission at the time of his death.

The epitaph for John Gilbert Winant, the former NH governor who served as the U.S ambassador to the UK during most of WW II, is reminiscent of Bruce’s approach to life:

“Doing the day’s work, day by day, doing a little, broadening our bases, wanting not for ourselves, but others also, a fairer change for all people everywhere, forever moving forward, always remembering that it is the things of the spirit that in the end prevail.”