A Tribute to Congressman James Langevin: Champion of Aged, Ill, Disabled, and Dying Americans

by Val J. Halamandaris
James R. Langevin is one of the most highly respected members of the U.S. Congress. This is a consequence of his unusual catalogue of gifts. He is known for his intelligence, good judgment, and ability to always do the right thing at just the right time. Similarly, he is revered for his integrity and ethics, having lived his life in conformity with the highest values. His word is his bond, and he is consistent in thought, word, and deed.

He is also celebrated as one of the most caring members of Congress. He has the ability to empathize with his fellow human beings, to feel their pain, and to help them transcend their circumstances by imparting hope and inspiration. This virtue is apparent to anyone who comes into his company because Congressman Langevin projects an air of goodness. He is one of the most positive people on the planet. His presence invokes confidence and lights up a room. His sincere interest in others and his ability to listen with energy draws people to him.

When most people meet him, they do not think of him as disabled. Instead, they view him as a man of passion, energy, and accomplishment. They also realize that he is a genuinely nice human being whose kindness masks an amazing strength of character. What Congressman Claude Pepper said of President Franklin D. Roosevelt applies equally to Jim Langevin. Pepper, who was the president's friend and confidant, said Roosevelt had “a soul sweetened by suffering.” The president had told Pepper that his fight with polio prepared him to endure the stresses of simultaneously dealing with World War II and the Great Depression. “After you spend a year trying to move your big toe,” Roosevelt explained, “anything else is easy by comparison.”

Congressman Langevin’s trials were not the results of polio or any other disease. They occurred because of a freak accident that left him wondering if he would be okay. “I was 16 years old,” the congressman recalls. “I was a young police cadet in the Explorer Scout program, much like a Boy Scout program but we learned about law enforcement and had the opportunity to work in the police department. I was well on my way to a career in law enforcement. I loved police work. And, as often happens, life doesn’t turn out the way you think it’s going to. I was in the locker room of the police station one afternoon getting ready to go on my shift. Two police officers were looking at a new weapon that one of them had purchased. Not realizing the gun was loaded, one of the officers pulled the trigger and the bullet ricocheted off the locker and went through my neck and severed my spinal cord. I have been paralyzed ever since.”

The injury ended his dreams of working in law enforcement, but it didn’t paralyze his will. “My inner drive would not let me sit idly by in self-pity. And neither did my family and friends,” he recalls. “After my accident, the tremendous outpouring of support I received from my community made me want to give something back. Their generosity and concern inspired me to run for office in 1986, which began a long and fulfilling career in public service that has included a seat in the Rhode Island General Assembly, two terms as secretary of state, and my eventual election to the United States Congress in 2000,” when he became the first quadriplegic in the House.

His first day in Congress was both “awesome” and “humbling,” Langevin recalls. “They had to engage in some pretty extensive renovations for me. They added a couple of accessible voting machines in the House chamber, removed two seats to give me a spot to pull into, and installed a new speaker’s podium that makes it possible for anyone in a wheelchair to speak on the floor,” Langevin says. “I recently told my friend Max Cleland, who is a triple amputee, ‘You got the Senate ramped up. I ramped up the House.’” And Langevin has achieved this goal both literally and figuratively through a robust set of committee assignments that let him tackle issues ranging from fiscal policy to the security of our nation. Langevin is a member of the House Armed Services Committee, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and a former member of the House Committee on the Budget.

In addition to his committee work, Langevin has become a national leader on cyber security, stem cell research, and health care reform issues. During his time in Congress, he has introduced measures to help businesses provide health care for employees, advocated for stricter computer security, and championed steps to provide respite care for family caregivers, protect the environment, and increase federal funding for life-saving research. Most recently, he became a front runner in the reignited debate on gun control. Last February, he convinced dozens of House Democrats to bring victims of gun violence to the State of the Union speech. “I organized the effort,” Langevin says, “because I wanted to put a human face on the tragedy that gun violence has taken in our country.”

He has also put a face on the disabled as founder and co-chair of the Bipartisan Disabilities Caucus, where he stresses the potential of the disabled. “My life experiences have taught me that great challenges present us with great opportunities,” Langevin says as he recalls his journey from paralyzed teen to powerful member of Congress. “Individuals with disabilities remain one of our nation’s greatest untapped resources. I truly believe we can achieve fiscal balance while investing in education, health care, and employment assistance to achieve a higher level of independence, productivity, and inclusion within our society,” Langevin says.

So he has played a key role in the full implementation of the
Americans with Disabilities Act. Since 1990, when the ADA was passed, “court decisions have increasingly narrowed the definition of disability to exclude many Americans who are discriminated against in the workplace based on a legitimate disabling condition,” Langevin explains. “Together with House Democratic Leader Steny Hoyer and many others, I worked tirelessly to pass the ADA Amendments Act, which was signed into law on July 25, 2008. This landmark legislation reaffirms the ADA’s protections and upholds the ideals of equality and opportunity on which this country was founded.”

To further strengthen these ideals, Langevin advocates for more access to community services and supports. “Home and community-based waivers in Medicaid,” he says, “have provided greater flexibility, independence, and community integration for children and adults with disabilities who receive care outside of more costly and restrictive institutional settings. By further exploring and supporting home and community-based programs, as well as other community supports like respite care, we can reduce costs to the system and improve the quality of care for individuals with disabilities across their lifespan.”

Their loved ones also need help, Langevin knows, so he supports respite services for full-time family caregivers of the disabled and aged. “Family caregivers provide approximately 80 percent of long-term care needs to the chronically ill,” Langevin notes. “In fact, there are over 65 million family caregivers in the U.S. and reports estimate the annual economic value of uncompensated family caregiving to be about $450 billion, more than total Medicaid spending in 2009. That is why I plan on reintroducing the Lifespan Respite Care Reauthorization Act to streamline the delivery of planned and emergency respite services, decreasing the need for professional long-term care that results in significant savings for the health care system and taxpayers.”

And Langevin cares about all the taxpayers he serves. “You should know,” he says, “that in my service in government I’ve never made disability issues my primary focus. Just as being disabled is a part of who I am, it is not who I am. That is reflected in my service here in Congress. I am working on so many issues, and disability issues are just one of them. I don’t seek to be the sole spokesman for disability issues or in a sense the poster child for these issues. I do recognize that I have a unique perspective on those issues and I have a responsibility to help further the cause. I do take those opportunities when they are presented to me or I seek them out from time to time, but again it is not the sole focus of who I am or what I do here. I have many other responsibilities that I take very seriously. As is the case with every person who has a limitation, we all have aspirations beyond the focus of our own disabilities.”

Prominent among them are the retirement security issues that concern many American seniors. So Langevin has strongly opposed proposals to privatize Social Security and end the Medicare guarantee. “Social Security and Medicare have been highly successful in keeping seniors out of poverty and providing access to quality health care. We can and must take steps to control these programs’ costs to maintain the promise of a secure retirement for our seniors,” he says. “We must not weaken programs on which so many depend. Seniors are still recovering from the economic recession that decimated private retirement accounts and erased trillions in wealth while Social Security didn’t lose a dime during the financial crisis. By phasing out the Social Security payroll tax cap that benefits wealthier individuals and building on the future health care savings passed in the Affordable Care Act, we can continue to ensure Social Security and Medicare work for everyone, both the seniors of today and those of tomorrow.”

Two years ago, Langevin met some of tomorrow’s seniors when he visited John Brown Francis Elementary School in Warwick, Rhode Island. During his visit, he read fifth-grade students House Mouse, Senate Mouse about a colony of mice that needed to name the official national cheese. After a heated debate, a senior mouse presented a solution that all the mice loved: American cheese. And their coming together was an example of patriotism and teamwork, Langevin told the students. “It takes a lot to reach an agreement sometimes, but we live in a very special country. It’s a government by the people for the people, meaning the people ultimately make the rules or laws.” That’s why it’s so important to stay informed on government issues. “You may even decide to run for office yourself, so it’s a good idea to pay attention to the bills that are
being passed,” Langevin said.

He gave America’s youth another vital lesson in 2010 on the 20th anniversary of the ADA. To mark the day, Langevin became the first lawmaker in a wheelchair to preside over the House. As he took the speaker’s rostrum, he recalled how a bullet killed his dreams of joining the police. “Having had my whole world shattered,” Langevin said he “looked to the achievements of other disabled people for inspiration.” Their example taught him that you can turn challenges into chances for building new dreams and giving back. He hoped some other young person struggling with doubt and despair would see him before the House “and know they’re going to be okay.”

Langevin has been more than okay because Divine Providence blessed him with a unique set of gifts that have made him a paladin of caring and compassion. He has accomplished a great deal during 12 years in Congress, where he has been a knight in shining armor, fighting for the rights of the aged, ill, disabled, and dying. But his victories, impressive as they may be, are but a faint harbinger of the deeds that he has yet to accomplish. CARING is proud to salute Congressman Langevin and thank him for his stellar career in public service. CARING will be standing by to lead the cheers as he fulfills his destiny and his dreams. He discussed some of them in the interview I conducted with him a few weeks ago. His own words describe him far better than the narrative that we have supplied.

**INTERVIEW: CONGRESSMAN JIM LANGEVIN IN HIS OWN WORDS**

*Val J. Halamandaris (VJH):* Congressman, I would like to begin by thanking you for your time. We are grateful for the opportunity to meet with you. My first question is: Do you have a favorite author, quotation, or perhaps something from the Bible that speaks to you?

**Congressman Jim Langevin (JL):** My favorite author is probably Dan Brown, the author of *The Da Vinci Code.* I’ve read several of his books, and I think he’s a fantastic author who writes page turners that really draw in his readers. As for a favorite quote, I’ve got a couple of them, but the one I like most is from the Bible. It’s when Jesus says, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you will say to that mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” And that’s kind of the story of my life. In a lot of ways I’ve had to move a lot of mountains along the way, and that quote has always inspired me.

**VJH:** What does leadership mean to you?

**JL:** Leadership means the ability to inspire others. I have many who have inspired me, and I have learned from them that leadership is the ability to encourage others to be their very best.

**VJH:** Who comes to mind when you think of great leaders?

**JL:** For me, it would undoubtedly be President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man with a disability who rose to serve in the nation’s highest office. He led us through World War II and the Depression, two of the most difficult times in our nation’s history. He faced great challenges and obstacles, yet he led us with great ability and grace. So did Senator Claiborne Pell, our late former senior United States senator, who was also an inspiration for me. He was a true gentleman and statesman in every sense of the word. In many ways I’ve tried to model my career after his great example. I feel so privileged to have been an intern for him twice when I was going through college because Senator Pell is someone I have always looked up to and admired.

**VJH:** If you were making a commencement speech and it could be heard by all the young people in America who were about to graduate from high school what advice would you give them?

**JL** I would tell today’s young people to follow their dreams and live with passion. Do the things you’re going to enjoy and remember your responsibility to give back in some way. I believe that we all have gifts and talents, things that we can do better than anyone else in the world. I think the challenge, the goal of life, the plan that God has for all of us, is to find out what those gifts are. We must then develop them and share them to try and make the world around us better than we found it.

**VJH:** Let me take you to the other end of the age spectrum. What advice would you give to America’s seniors?

**JL** I would advise our nation’s seniors to share their experiences and wisdom, especially with the younger generation. We must help young people to understand that the road is not always easy but everybody can make a difference. I would tell older people to please get involved, stay involved, and be politically active. There are so many things worth fighting for, like preserving Social Security and Medicare. Obviously, these programs are vitally important not only to our current seniors but also to future generations of seniors who will come along. Social Security and Medicare in many ways are under attack right now, and I’m concerned for both of these programs. I’m a staunch defender of Social Security and Medicare, but I can’t fight for them alone. This is a team effort so the more people who rally to the cause the better. I think advocacy is an area where seniors can clearly play an important role. You can’t sit back. You must be vocal and defend those programs which help others and hopefully keep them strong for future generations.
VJH: You just said that one person can make a difference. Can you say a little more on that subject?

JL: Absolutely. One person can make a difference. Sometimes the difference is small; sometimes it’s great. But every person can make a difference in some capacity or another. As I’ve said, I really do believe that every person, each one of us, is born with certain gifts and talents, things that we can do better than anyone else. God’s goal, I believe, is for all of us is to find out what those gifts and talents are, then develop them and share them with the world. Our goal should be to try to make the world around us a better place than when we found it. It may be a cliché, but it’s something that I’ve believed in all my life. By living our lives with passion and purpose, we really do make a positive difference in the world.

VJH: Mother Teresa said her greatest lesson was “to love God with all your heart and soul, to love your neighbor as yourself, and to love the hole in your heart as much as your heart.” I want to ask you the question I posed to her. What would you say is the greatest lesson you have learned in your lifetime?

JL: Well, I certainly would not disagree with Mother Teresa. I think she had it spot on the way she put it. For me one of the greatest lessons is also to persevere and understand that life is full of peaks and valleys, tests and challenges. Nobody gets through life without facing tough times, and we all have the ability to overcome them. I believe tests and challenges are God’s way of testing us, shaping us, molding us, making us better and stronger people. We must understand that life is about cycles, peaks, and valleys. You can’t get too excited about the peaks, but you don’t want to get too low in the valleys because life is a process and in the end things even out. We all are placed under pressure, but we all have the capacity to triumph and persevere. Life is an endurance test. One of the most important lessons is to remain determined and positive no matter what challenges you face.

VJH: Mother Teresa helped us create the Caring Institute. What does caring mean to you?

JL: Caring means empathy, being able to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and try to understand what they are going through. Caring is also about wanting to make a difference in others’ lives. I think that’s an important message for us all. If you really care and you want to help, you must get involved and understand what those around you are going through and try to be a positive influence on the world.

VJH: What do you see ahead for Congressman Jim Langevin?

JL: Well, I feel that my work is still underway. I want to be able to break down as many barriers and open up doors of opportunity for as many people as I can. I have a love of public service, and I want others to have the same kind of opportunities I’ve had in my life. I want to continue working on issues that I care passionately about. National security is something I spend a lot of time on. We have a lot of work in store to keep our country safer, whether it’s in cyber security or other military defense. I love this country with all my heart and I want to make sure we’re as strong as we can possibly be. We face great challenges right now, especially on the fiscal and economic front. We have a lot of work ahead to get our fiscal house in order to ensure we leave our country in sound financial shape for the future. And so our work is not done, and I hope I can continue standing for truth and justice and make a positive difference in others’ lives.

VJH: How would you like to be remembered? I normally ask this of older people. You’re relatively young so I hope you will excuse me.

JL: Thank you. Well, I hope I have a long way to go and many years ahead, but none of us ever really knows for sure. I would like to be remembered as someone who made a difference in the world. As I said, we all have gifts and talents, and I like to think that whatever my gifts are I’ve been able to share them. Public service has always been important to me, and I want to continue to serve. Hopefully, I’ll be remembered as someone who lived with dignity and respect and made a positive difference in the world.

VJH: Congressman, what can you tell us about your experience with home care?

JL: Home care is incredibly important to me. It means
independence and living a full life in my own home. All my life I have observed that we all will need help along the way. Nobody gets through life without it. For some, it’s a little bit of help; for others a lot. For me, it has meant having people assist me in the morning and evening, and because of them I’ve been able to live a very full and independent life. Without home care, I might very well have been placed into institutional care. My experience with home care has been so positive that I have developed a passion for making sure that independent living programs are supported and continued. I want to ensure that all Americans, including those with disabilities, can to the greatest possible extent live in their own homes and enjoy full and productive lives.

VJH: Like you, I believe that everybody should have the ability to enjoy the maximum degree of the freedom that our forefathers guaranteed us. You've spoken out against new regulations that would delete the companionship exemption. What reasons did you give the regulators at the Office of Management and Budget for opposing these changes?

JL: I was concerned and I remain concerned about the unintended consequences of the proposed rule change. I’m concerned both for the people receiving the care and for the people who are giving the care. I believe in and I value greatly the services of the people who have assisted me over the years. But I understand that without greater reimbursement reform and more resources, it will be very difficult to see a change in the rule. I say this because I think what would wind up happening is the people who now receive care would not be able to afford it under the rule change that’s being proposed. They would have trouble paying overtime and so hours would be cut back or you would have to get a third person in the mix or yet another person in the mix to assist with care. I think you would potentially see less care for the persons who need it and hours cut back for the caregivers who provide it. Neither patients nor caregivers would benefit from the rule change, and it might actually put them both at a disadvantage.

VJH: What do you believe should be done to improve care?

JL: Well, I would agree that one of the best things we can do is to preserve Medicare and make sure we’re stretching our health care dollars as far as they’ll go to make things more cost-effective. We need to offer more preventive care and ensure we have better coordination of care and a continuum of care through patient-centered medical homes. I believe that greater use of home care ultimately will result in better and more cost-effective care.

VJH: Two last questions. Some people say that America’s best days are behind us. Others say they lie ahead. Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

JL: Oh, I am forever the optimist, and I believe that America’s better days and best days lie ahead. Every generation is tested and challenged by its own set of difficulties and problems. We are no different, and we’re going through ours right now. But I do think America’s best days are still ahead of us. My belief is the country will be better off because of the challenges we’re going through right now. We’re not there yet, but we have the momentum and the determination to get there.

VJH: Congressman, the final question is just to ask is there something you would like to add to this interview that was not prompted by a question?

JL: I would like to add the names of people who have inspired me. I want to mention heroes in the disabilities movement who helped with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). These extraordinary people include congressmen Tony Coelho and Steny Hoyer, Justin Dart, Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Bob Dole, and President George Herbert Walker Bush who signed the ADA into law. These are people who have brought down barriers and opened up doors of opportunity for the disabled to the tune of millions of people past, present, and yet to come. The ADA certainly made a difference in my life and greatly enhanced my ability to serve in the United States Congress. I remember what the world was like before the ADA. I was injured in 1980, so it was a full 10 years before the ADA was passed. I experienced the difference the ADA made, so I’m grateful for the vision, perseverance, and leadership of those who saw to the passage of the ADA. I continue to do everything I can to strengthen the ADA and help realize its promise for others. I was proud to be there when we passed the ADA Enhancements Act to restore the original promise of the ADA after it had been weakened by several court rulings over the years. I was proud to be a part of that effort to improve the ADA and then to be in the Oval Office with President George W. Bush when he signed the ADA Amendments Act into law.

VJH: Thank you Congressman. This has been a great interview. You know of the great respect and admiration we have for you. You have helped millions enjoy better and more productive lives; you are a wonderful role model for all Americans.

JL: Thank you Val. It is always good to be with you and share a few thoughts with you.

Editors Note: Managing Editor Lisa Yarkony contributed to the introduction of this article.