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Harvard professor plans 'truth' lecture in salute to high ethics of Arthur Holland

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

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During the 27 years he served as mayor of Trenton, the late Arthur Holland was known for having a highly ethical administration, refusing gifts and maintaining transparency and honesty both in practice and perception.

"He was just known for his very ethical standards, and the fact that he conducted a very open-door policy," his widow, Betty Holland, recalled yesterday. "Anybody could walk into any city meeting. There was not such a thing as a closed meeting, and that was before the Open (Public) Meetings Act."

The open-meetings act, a state law enacted in 1975, is commonly called the Sunshine Law. It established the public's right to attend all meetings of public bodies and to witness all their deliberations (and to receive 48 hours' advance notice of the meetings).

Holland advocated for his vision of moral politics as an instructor at Rutgers University and in 1989, the year he died, the university established the Arthur J. Holland Program on Ethics in Government, which is now part of the Eagleton Institute of Politics in New Brunswick.

Tomorrow night, the institute will host the program's annual Holland lecture with professor Michael Sandel, of Harvard University, who will give a talk and interactive program titled "Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?"

Sandel has drawn notice and praise for his hugely popular philosophy course, which has enrolled more than 1,000 students at a time. A series of classes in which he explores questions like, "Is torture ever justified?" and "Is it sometimes wrong to tell the truth?" recently became a 12-part public-television series.

"His topic of 'What's the Right Thing to Do?' points to both the importance of asking that type of question and the difficulty of how to answer it," said John Weingart, the institute's associate director. "He engages his audience, and takes questions that might at first appear simple and reveals they're really very complex."

Betty Holland, a one-time Eagleton Fellow, said Sandel's talent for engaging students matches her late husband's particular interest in encouraging young people to enter public service. Sandel's talk will encourage audience members to ask themselves the kind of questions Mayor Holland wanted officials to learn to address, she said.

"The idea is decision-making -- how you come to the just and ethical decision," she said. "People in politics are often confronted with these decisions, and a lot of them make the wrong choice."

Holland was mayor from 1959 to 1966 and 1970 to 1989. In 1988, he became president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Ingrid Reed, director of the Eagleton Institute's New Jersey Project and an advocate for stronger laws on government ethics, said Arthur Holland stood out for his outspokenness. She worked with him through her involvement in the Capital City Development Corporation.

"It was his willingness to discuss ethics and the responsibilities of public officials that made him an exemplary kind of person, not just that he had personal ethics we would admire," she said.

The lecture is tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. and admission is free. To RSVP, call (732) 932-9384, ext. 331, or visit the events page at www.eagleton.rutgers.edu.

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