

Nonprofit innovator dies at 68

Greg Speeter founded nationally known group

By BARBARA SOLOW
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HATFIELD — Friends and colleagues say Greg Speeter, founder and former director of the Northampton-based National Priorities Project, was a rare combination of visionary and everyman, a person whose legacy is an organization that brings the reality of the federal budget home.



GREG SPEETER

Speeter, who died Thursday at age 68 after a long battle with cancer, was “just a force for good in all of our lives,” said Northampton City Councilor Pamela Schwartz, who was the project’s communications director for 10 years. “He had the intelligence and commitment and determination to make change, and we all got to benefit from that.”

Speeter, a Minnesota native and

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longtime Hatfield resident, founded the nonprofit research group in 1983 as a way to help community groups better understand and respond to federal budget policy. The project’s inaugural report, “In Defense of the First District,” highlighted the loss of \$54 million in social spending in the late U.S. Rep. Silvio Conte’s district during the early years of the Reagan Administration.

The report — which was credited with changing how Conte voted on the budget — was also the first to explore the impact of federal spending at the congressional district level.

When the Bush administration launched the war in Iraq in 2003, Speeter’s organization once again broke ground by calculating the cost of the conflict in terms of dollars diverted from local communities. The group’s website offered a cost-of-war counter that helped visitors calculate how much their towns paid for the war in lost spending on health care, education and energy.

“That data was used in City Council resolutions and in national and local media reports

from CNN to Democracy Now,” Schwartz said. “It played a significant role in bringing the cost of that war home.”

The NPP’s ongoing research into how federal tax dollars are spent remains a powerful tool for activists and ordinary citizens, said Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, who met Speeter in the early 1990s when she was a keynote speaker for his group’s annual dinner.

“His legacy is that people across the country working on issues from housing to health care to ending wars can all do our jobs better,” Bennis said. “Greg understood far earlier than anyone else the importance of truly understanding the budget.”

Boundless optimism

Despite his keen interest in budget figures, friends and former co-workers say Speeter

was the opposite of a dry statistician. A former organizer for Volunteers in Service to America in Springfield and for the Citizen Involvement Training Project in Amherst, he had a wry sense of humor and a boundless store of optimism, they say.

Jo Comerford, who took over as executive director when Speeter stepped down in 2008, recalls him dragging enormous rolls of pennies onto airplanes and trains while traveling to speak at policy conferences and training sessions. The pennies were used to illustrate exactly how federal dollars were being allocated — how much for military spending and how much for social programs.

“I still remember how he

looked carrying those huge rolls of coins,” she said with a smile.

“I never saw him get discouraged about anything,” Comerford added. “He always had a funny story.”

“His passion was contagious,” Schwartz said. “And he never lost faith.”

Friends and family say Speeter doted on his grandson, 2, and reveled in the joys of life on his farm in Hatfield.

“He just made the most of that time,” said Betsy Speeter, his wife of 36 years. The family is planning a memorial sometime in the next few months.

Speeter’s commitment to helping ordinary citizens understand complex budget issues is more important than

ever, say people who have used his organization’s research.

“Here we are fussing about the very thought that we might reduce military expenditures at the same time we’re being asked to reduce funding for all kinds of social programs,” said U.S. Rep. John Oliver, D-Amherst. “Greg’s greatest effort was at showing, in extreme detail, how the enormous military footprint affects everything.”

People interviewed Friday suggested Speeter’s legacy may lie in creating a model for providing information in a way that activates as well as informs. “He believed that the federal budget had to be understood by every single person,” Comerford said, “so they could change it.”

“Greg was the kind of person who loved talking to people, and could convince almost anyone to come over to his way of thinking,” said Philip Korman of Northampton, NPP’s development director for seven years.

“He could also tell you what the weather was on any day of any year,” added Korman, who is now executive director of Communities Involved in Sustaining Agriculture. “He just had that kind of memory.”

Co-workers say Speeter brought humor and creativity into his work with the National Priorities Project.