

A Tribute to Savino Salerno

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Savino Salerno, a passionate senior advocate, member of the Gray Panthers, and my friend, passed away at age 95 on Saturday, April 26, 2014. His activism was mentioned only briefly in his obituary. This is my tribute to him.

A member of our “Greatest Generation,” Savino was a Navy veteran of World War II. He served aboard an attack transport ship in six amphibious landings, including the Normandy invasion on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Like so many of his generation, he rarely talked about his military experience. He probably agreed with the late Senator George McGovern that “we felt the real heroes were those who didn’t come back.” After the war, Savino graduated from URI and worked at Leeson Corporation for thirty years.

After retiring, Savino became a caregiver for his late wife Marie, who suffered from chronic illness for many years. While this responsibility kept him close to home, I never once heard him complain about the burden of caregiving. As a caregiver he became very familiar with issues like affordability of prescription drugs and the need for high quality homecare services. This led him to connect with the Rhode Island Gray Panthers, where he became one of our most stalwart leaders and spokespersons.

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the national Gray Panthers, once urged her members thusly: “Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind - even if your voice shakes. When you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say. Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants.” She would have loved Savino---that was his style, and his voice never shook. Savino relished the opportunity to speak up to legislators and governors and demand that they do the right thing.

My most vivid memory of him was his testimony, at age 90, before a General Assembly hearing in 2009. The Senior Agenda Coalition and Gray Panthers had mounted a campaign to prevent the Rhode Island Pharmaceutical Assistance for the Elderly Program (RIPAE) from being eliminated in the governor’s budget. Savino stood before the House Finance Committee and opened by announcing, “I’m Savino Salerno, and I was born on America Street,” a not so subtle reference to the Federal Hill district of Committee Chair Steven Costantino (although Savino was now a Pawtucket resident). After briefly detailing the reasons why low-income seniors needed RIPAE, he closed by thundering, “If anyone on this committee doesn’t vote to save RIPAE, then he or she shouldn’t show their face in church next Sunday!” But he said it with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Few people could get away with calling out legislators in that fashion, but Savino could. His sincerity and passion really won over legislators. They restored the RIPAE program to the budget, where it remains to this day. Savino's memory, and Maggie Kuhn's words, call out to all of us as seniors to speak up and not allow ourselves to be ignored or marginalized. Our cause will miss Savino. We needed him and will never have enough people like him on our side.