

It is with a heavy heart that I write to share the news of the passing of PLS Board member John Dunne. He died Monday night at his home, surrounded by his wife Denise and the rest of his extraordinary family.

There is little I can say about [John Dunne](#) that has not already been said (see attached, [Whiteman, Osterman & Hanna](#) remembrance and [WAMC](#) which aired yesterday.)

There are few people who truly inspire others to do their best. For me, John topped the list.

John was what people now refer to as a “Rockefeller Republican.” Today, of all days, that term speaks volumes. John didn’t care about the political party you came from; he cared about the fabric you were made of. John was a gentleman and a scholar and he cared deeply about this huge democratic experiment in which this country is engaged.

As many of you know, when John was a NYS Senator he went to Attica during the 1971 uprising. He was there to negotiate with the incarcerated individuals who had put together a list of demands. He encouraged then-governor Rockefeller to come to the prison to speak to the prisoners, but Rockefeller refused. After three days of trying to come to a resolution, and on the cusp of doing so, unbeknownst to John, Rockefeller ordered the takeover of the prison by the State Police.

Often referred to as “[the turkey shoot](#)” the state police began blindly firing into the yard after canisters of tear gas had been dropped by helicopters flying above. Dozens of people were pointlessly killed by state police bullets. This event left an indelible mark on John.

As a PLS Board member, John used to testify with me at the joint budget hearings before the Legislature. When he did, he always carried with him an old tattered 3 x 5 index card in his left breast pocket – the card was a list of the demands of the prisoners at Attica during the negotiation. He would take out the card and he would begin to shake. Trying to hold back the tears, he would read demand #13:

13. We Demand the appointment of three lawyers from the New York State Bar Association to full-time positions for the provision of legal assistance to inmates seeking post-conviction relief, and to act as a liaison between the administration and inmates for bringing inmates’ complaints to the attention of the administration.

John never forgot those he met at Attica, the fear in their faces, the anger, frustration and desperation in their voices and their plea for legal representation. That experience stayed with John and informed almost everything he did going forward. From his work as Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division under George H. W. Bush, to his leadership on several boards including PLS and ILS, John spent the rest of his life pressing home the need for adequate legal representation *for all*.

As most of you know, the inaugural PLS John R. Dunne Championship of Justice Award was bestowed on John in 2014, and he has joined PLS every year ever since then to give the award to other deserving recipients: Assemblyman Jeffrion Aubry, Assemblyman Daniel O’Donnell,

former NYSDA Ex. Dir. Jonathan Gradess, Assemblyman David Weprin and last year, Bruce Gitlin, all individuals who have spent their lives fighting for justice.

This past July, John called me to tell me that he wouldn't be around much longer. He told me that a year ago the doctors had given him four or five months to live, so, "I've beat the odds and I am feeling pretty lucky." I mentioned to him that he happened to be calling me on my 60th birthday and he said, "Oh! To be 60 again!" And we laughed.

He called, however, not to talk about himself, but to apologize for not being able to make the recent board meeting. He told me that he loves PLS and that "I want you to keep up the fight because PLS' work is so incredibly important. I will be with you in spirit." He closed by saying: "The only good thing that came out of Attica was PLS."

For those of you who don't know, although a giant among men, John was also one of the kindest, gentlest individuals I have even known. As some of you might know, Lemuel Smith has been a PLS client on and off for years, and it was John who urged me to find some way to challenge Mr. Smith's time in Administrative Segregation (33+ years.) We ultimately were able to find a firm to sue on his behalf and they are currently negotiating a settlement that will allow him to have the additional privileges he wants. But again, I tell you this, not because John never gave up on Lemuel Smith, but because I also want you to know that John has communicated with him for the past 30 years, sending him books, cards and letters, doing whatever he could to interrupt the solitude.

There is so much more I could say about John, but the tears keep getting in the way.

He was a grand man. They don't make them like that anymore. I will miss him dearly. But in tribute to him, let us all remember to "keep up the fight." He did and, in honor of him, it is the least we can do.

For those of you who might want to send a card, the address of the Dunne family is:

PO Box 270

Spencertown, NY 12165

Rest in well-deserved peace John Dunne.