

Plenary Presentation

7.2 PRESENTATION OF THE RAY SENTES AWARD TO BARRY CASTLEMAN

KYLA SENTES

I first want to thank the organizers of this congress for inviting me here and giving me this opportunity. I am truly honoured. This has been an amazing experience and the generosity, commitment, and passion I have witnessed here has been quite overwhelming.

For those of you who did not know my father, I wanted to give you a little bit of background so that you might understand how he became involved in the asbestos fight and how it shaped his life.

My father was born in the tiny town of Punnichy, Saskatchewan, Canada in 1943, into a situation of extreme poverty. Ray was the youngest of five boys and the family was often looked down upon because of their low economic standing within the community. When his father, a blacksmith, died when Ray was just 14 life became a great deal harder. He was forced to work whenever he wasn't attending school, doing odd jobs to help his mother financially keep things afloat.

However, despite the economic situation of his family, he knew that the world still had a great deal to offer and his interests were indeed diverse. Along with being a talented young hockey player (few people know that he had been drafted by the National Hockey League and had he been able to put on a few more pounds, I might be telling a very different story today indeed), he was a lover of books and music, he had a tremendous interest in travel and, most importantly, a growing thirst for knowledge. He spent several years trying to earn enough money to travel the world. Little did he know how those years he spent as a journeyman asbestos insulator would shape his life in the coming years.

He met my mother, Sandra, at an English hospital where she was nursing on one of those trips. The two married in 1968 and a couple of years later my sister, Rachel was born. Ray then began his studies at the University of Essex. It was there that his strong concerns for social justice issues first began to take shape. Having come from his background of poverty, Ray had an invaluable insight to offer his fellow students. While most simply studied the theories of work and inequality, he had experienced the worker's life first hand. This was something that would help him tremendously in later years during his academic and labour-oriented pursuits.

But in 1975 something greater took hold on the direction of my father's life, his diagnosis of the chronic and debilitating illness, asbestosis. The asbestosis began to change and shape all of our lives in ways we would never have imagined, in many

negative ways but some positive as well. Ray became heavily involved in Occupational Health and Safety issues working with unions as a health and safety director, as an advocate for injured workers, and with law firms and NGOs in their actions against asbestos companies.

His goal always was to see that needless tragedies like his own would be averted in the future. His involvement with health and safety continued well into the 80s with his doctoral dissertation at the University of Regina. It is our hope that his history of the Canadian asbestos industry will be published in the near future. Outside of the university Ray was always ready and willing to assist other asbestos victims, as many of you here well know. Despite his failing health, he was always consumed by an inner sense of justice to try and bring an end to the tragedies asbestos has wrought worldwide.

However, he also felt he could effect a great deal of positive change through his role as a professor in political science as well. I was fortunate enough to have been one of my father's students. I, along with many other students, had a tremendous amount of respect for the way in which he approached his teaching. His aim as a professor was always to instill in students the same passion for learning which had driven him all his life. He hoped that upon taking one of his courses, be it in political economy, environmental politics, or occupational health, each student would leave wanting to do something about the issues they were learning about. And unlike many other professors, he hoped that he too might learn something from his students. He was a hard professor with high expectations, but he was always fair. And what one remarked most from taking a class from Professor Sentes was how infectious his desire to challenge minds was. It was more important for him to develop passionate, thoughtful and critical thinkers than to receive academic prestige.

Ray died on April 13th of this year, after a 25 year long battle with this horrific disease. While this has obviously been an extremely difficult time for us all, perhaps the most positive aspect of this tragedy has been what has been revealed to us about Ray from others who knew him. In many ways, we have spent much of the time since his death putting together pieces of a puzzle. Our family was blessed to have him as a devoted father and husband, but it's often difficult for us to understand the relationships people had with him in other aspects of his life. Likewise, it may be difficult for you, his colleagues, or for his students and others who knew Ray, to understand his life with his family.

Throughout this time we've learned of the respect he garnered from almost everyone he encountered, even those people with whom he might have had great ideological or political differences.

I was recently told a story about the time Dad was in the process of applying for a teaching position at the University of Regina. At the time, he felt the best way to vie for the position was to attack the university president on his lax stance on the removal of asbestos from the campus. Perhaps not the most strategically astute move, but Dad was never one to back down, even when a job was at stake. The president saw that strength of character in Ray, and hired him for precisely the feistiness that was getting him into

trouble. The asbestos was eventually removed and Ray did indeed live up to his reputation and continued to fight tooth and nail at the university and elsewhere for those things which he felt were most important in his life.

That perhaps is the most remarkable comment we've heard repeatedly from his friends and colleagues, that he was a principled man, one who was never swayed from his convictions by the winds of change, be they political or otherwise. There were many times in his life where Ray could have taken the easy road by sacrificing his principles, and to do so would have made life much simpler. But I firmly believe that he could not have lived with a decision that meant sacrificing the ideals in which he believed.

However, from this came what may be my dad's greatest fault, his apparent absolute inability to say 'no' to those people or causes that he felt were in need. He always knew that, despite the hand he was dealt, there were people out there who had it far worse and because of that, he felt obliged to always do as much as he could to help those people. One of the greatest lessons my father taught me was to never give up the good fight, no matter how large or small. And he never did. Sadly, the fight with his health was one he could not win, but it was a valiant effort on his part to battle the asbestosis that every day took over more and more of his life.

Indeed, what always amazed us was the sheer fact that dad was able to find the reasons to get up each morning despite the myriad of insults this disease inflicted on his body. Even when his life had been voided of some of the simplest pleasures he loved, like taking a walk in the park with Sandra, or going out after classes with his colleagues, or taking his girls out for an afternoon, he was still able to appreciate the beauty around him. Such was his absolute love of life. He loved everything from nature, poetry, music, film, dogs, art, cartoons, philosophy, science and beyond. There was little in the world that didn't hold some kind of wonderment for dad, nothing that didn't hold some beauty, and nothing that was more fulfilling than his continued desire to learn more about the world that surrounded him and to keep pushing towards leaving it a bit better than when he entered it.

There were so very many facets to Ray, and as a result there are so very many things we have lost with his death. Students have lost a dedicated professor who cared about seeing every student succeed, not just the brilliant ones. Those involved in the asbestos battle have lost a passionate fighter and friend to the cause. And our family has lost more still, and that is what is most difficult for me to express.

To so many, he often appeared as a stern and intimidating man. Many are unable to fathom the humour and warmth he showed as a husband to Sandra, as a father to myself and to Rachel, and even to the family dog. Others have not been fortunate enough to see the loving man who gave me my first poetry lesson with the Cremation of Sam McGee and the Rime of the Ancient Mariner. The husband who courted Sandra with roses. The father who spent weeks in the backyard in -30 degree weather making a snowslide for his girls. Who spent hours walking a cold beach to find a lost teddy bear. Who taught me the importance of good research, but at the end of the day...the importance of following your heart and doing what you feel most passionately about.

With Ray's death we've lost a friend, a colleague, an ally, a husband, a father, and a mentor. And these are things which can never be replaced. I think it was most well said recently by a colleague of my father's when he remarked that "the world is a better place for having had Ray, but on the other hand, it is much poorer now that he is gone."

Today would have been my father's 57th birthday. He always hoped that after his passing that we would not go out of our way to mourn his death but rather, to celebrate his life. I can think of no better way to honour his memory then for all of us here to celebrate his life and his work with this award. And I can think of no better recipient than a man for whom dad not only held a tremendous amount of respect, but whom he was happy to call his friend, Barry Castleman.

Barry has been involved in asbestos issues since he was a student and, in fact, wrote what many of us consider to be the bible on the issue of asbestos: Medical and Legal Aspects. He is a stalwart defender of asbestos victims and has helped thousands of injured people obtain compensation throughout the United States. His reputation is such that when the EU defense team needed help in defending the French ban on asbestos, he was asked to join their team. His enthusiasm and forcefulness were pivotal in obtaining contributions to help make this Congress possible.

The Global Asbestos Congress thanks him for his dedication and commitment. And I know Ray would thank you, Barry, for bringing everyone here together in the hope for an asbestos free future. It is with great pleasure that I present the Ray Sentes Award to Barry Castleman.