JAMES J. FLORIO: A Leader for New Jersey

For 20 years, James Florio has fought to make New Jersey a healthier, safer, better place to live. But he has been a leader, a doer, a person with a deep commitment to excellence for longer than that.

The Florio story is that of a youngster from Brooklyn who worked his way up, guided by a thirst for learning and a desire to serve. The first member of his family ever to be graduated from college, he rose to a place of leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Almanac of American Politics called the First District’s Congressman “one of the hardest working and most effective members” of the House.

Now Jim Florio is running for New Jersey Governor -- a job for which his skills, his experience, and his lifetime of preparation make him ideally suited. It was Jim Florio who recognized that toxic time bombs like Love Canal, in New York, had to be cleaned up so that people could go on with their lives without worrying about the health threats from contaminated drinking water. The result of his efforts was the federal Superfund program to clean up toxic waste sites and go after polluters to make them pay.

When Superfund was renewed in 1986, Florio led the way in creating new “Right-to-Know” provisions requiring companies that use hazardous chemicals to make sure neighboring residents are told what substances are being dumped into the surrounding water and air.

Jim Florio was one of the first to stand up to polluters and press for an end to the poisoning of our oceans with sludge, garbage, and other wastes dumped there. His legislation is helping to rid our schools of cancer-causing asbestos, and it was Florio who took the lead in the House to stop the irresponsible dumping of medical wastes that has too often made New Jersey beaches into recreational, economic, and health disaster areas.

Jim Florio believes New Jersey, shaped by two great rivers and bordered by a magnificent ocean, has no greater resource than its water. And Jim Florio stands up for what he believes. He stands up to those whose actions endanger the safety and health of our state. Public Citizen, a nonprofit, grassroots organization, named Florio as one of only 15 House members worthy of recognition for standing against special interests on a wide range of interests. “Representative Florio has consistently voted to protect the health, safety, and pocketbooks of consumers,” the group said.

Environmental Action, a group active in cleaning up our water and air, said of Florio, “You have been a thoughtful and courageous legislator. Your deep commitment to environmental and energy issues and leadership in the field of environmental issues will earn you the gratitude of generations to come.”

Fighting for New Jersey has led Florio into major roles on other issues as well. He was a leader in the fight to preserve viable passenger and freight rail service for the state. As Chairman of a House subcommittee charged with consumer affairs, he has been in the forefront of the fight against escalating insurance rates and in the effort to protect the elderly from the hyped-up claims of some insurance companies.
Jim Florio believes that a safe, healthy state is also a drug-free state. Recognizing that the war on drugs must be fought on three fronts -- law enforcement, education and treatment -- he has been making that fight in Washington. Florio is the sponsor of legislation to stiffen the penalties for drug pushers who use youngsters as couriers. Another Florio bill would require health insurance policies to cover drug and alcohol treatment. And, he is cosponsor of legislation to give back to the states the money from federally confiscated assets of drug dealers.

As a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Florio is widely recognized as a champion of the rights of former members of our Armed Forces. His legislation is creating a memorial in Washington to those who fought in the Korean War, and he has been a leader in the fight by Vietnam veterans to get the federal government to acknowledge the connection between the Agent Orange defoliant and cancer. Vietnam Veterans of America named him their "Legislator of the Year."

Realizing the changing nature of the American family, Florio is active in the campaign to make quality daycare available. He was an original cosponsor of the Act for Better Childcare Services, the most comprehensive daycare proposal in years. He is House sponsor of the Literacy Corps, a proposal in which college students would go back into their communities and teach illiterate adults how to read.

Florio himself is a high school dropout, who turned his life around through hard work and an urge to learn.

James Joseph Florio was born August 29, 1937, in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. He was named for his father, Vincenzo "Jim" Florio and his grandfather, Giuseppe (Joseph) Florio. He is the oldest of three sons born to Vincenzo and Lilian Florio. Mr. Florio painted ships in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where Jim Florio's maternal grandfather, Charlie Hazel, also worked as a master pipefitter.

When Jim Florio was a boy, the family moved to Flatbush, not far from Ebbets Field, where Jim frequently attended Brooklyn Dodgers baseball games (his hero was Pete Reiser). It was at the local Boys Club that Jim Florio first got involved in another of his great interests, the sport of boxing.

As a young boy at P.S. 179, Florio recalls looking forward each week to the arrival of "My Weekly Reader," so he could turn to the back page and take the current events quiz. His great love was reading, instilled by his mother, who exposed him to a wide range of writers including Zane Grey, John Steinbeck, and Mark Twain. He recalls going off to the Brooklyn Public Library for Saturday morning programs, toting a peanut butter sandwich and his books.

As a teenager, Florio worked hard. He delivered the Brooklyn Eagle newspaper, and worked as a delivery boy for Louie Balitsky's Kosher Meat Market and Goodman's Grocery Store.

At 17, after his junior year, Florio left Erasmus Hall High School to join the Navy enlisting as a Seaman Recruit. He served from 1955-58, and remained in the Naval Reserves until 1975, retiring with the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

In the Navy, Florio started down an educational path that eventually would take him to college, law school and a career in public service. While stationed as an aviation
weatherman in Key West, Florida, and Kodiak, Alaska, Florio took correspondence courses that enabled him to pass the General Education Development test and earn his high school equivalency diploma. Mindful of the role that this second chance played in his life, Florio has appeared with Wally "Famous" Amos as a spokesman for the GED program in a national television advertising campaign.

Throughout his Navy career, Florio boxed. A light middleweight, he fought at 156 pounds. His last fight was in Alaska, when he took on a 172-pounder because his and Florio's opponents both cancelled out. "His name was Sherman White. He was a very tall fellow from Louisiana," Florio recalls of that fight. "He hit me about six times and broke something each time. That was my retirement fight."

Discharged from the Navy at the end of his three-year enlistment, Florio was a different person in many respects. "It was a very important part of my life," he recalls. "I started to understand about education being something that you did for a purpose, as opposed to just going to school because someone told you to." By then, with the shutdown of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, his parents left Brooklyn. They moved to a bungalow in Hopatcong, Sussex County, and Vincenzo Florio drove every day to Hoboken, where he found work at the local shipyards.

Florio came home from the Navy with a thought in his mind that never existed during his Brooklyn days: college. Using his benefits from the Korean War GI Bill, Florio enrolled at Trenton State College, with the idea of being a teacher. Unsure of how he would fare in this new setting, Florio quickly found out that his ability and hard work would earn him top grades. With a heavy course load and student teaching in Ewing Township, Florio still managed to graduate magna cum laude with a degree in Social Studies.

He also got his first taste of elective politics -- winning election as president of the college student government.

Florio won a prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Columbia University, where he studied Public Law and Government with an eye toward becoming a college professor. But his courses with well-known presidential scholar Richard Neustadt gave Florio another idea, government service. He moved to Camden, and after working for a year as Assistant Urban Renewal Director in Glassboro, saved the money to attend Rutgers University's Law School in Camden.

He was graduated in 1967, with a juris doctor degree, and admitted into the New Jersey Bar.

Florio was elected to his first of three terms in the New Jersey Assembly in 1969. Following an unsuccessful campaign in 1972, in 1974 he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives as the first Democrat to hold the seat in his district in 102 years. He has been re-elected seven times -- with more than 70 percent of the vote -- and has risen to hold the Chairmanship of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection and Competitiveness of the Energy and Commerce Committee, and of the Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests of the House Select Committee on Aging.

After a respectable finish in the 1977 primary, Florio in 1981 won the Democratic nomination for Governor. He lost by 1,797, votes, the closest election in the state's history.
Florio married Lucinda Coleman in February, 1988. She teaches third grade at the John Glenn School in Pine Hill, and they live in Blackwood, Gloucester Township. Florio has three children from a previous marriage: Christopher, 29, who teaches music in Boston; Gregory, 27, who works as a draftsman for a construction firm and lives with his wife, Ann, and their children, Matthew and Chelsea in Collingswood; and Catherine, 24, who is a student at the Thomas Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia.

Florio enjoys reading historical novels and nonfiction, and attending boxing matches. He and his wife are ardent runners, and they like to relax by taking walks or bicycle rides.