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The Beebe News CLASSIFIEDS! Deadline for

the week is Monday at 3 p.m. Call 501-882-5414 to place your ad.

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September 29, 2024 - 12 Nights / 13 Days - \$2975 Storybook Smokies: A Maze of Mountains and Maples October 20, 2024 – 5 nights/6 days – \$1250 Alpine Christmas

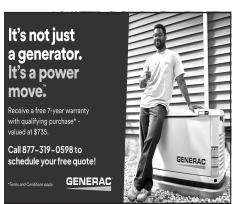
December 6, 2024 - 5 Nights / 6 Days - \$1175





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# History Minute

By Dr. Ken Bridges - Professor of History, South Arkansas Community College South Arkansas Historical Preservation Society

kbridges@southark.edu<mailto:kbridges@southark.edu>

"What are you going to do about it?" implored a mother to her son one day. The year was 1969, and US Rep. David Pryor was being confronted by his mother about a serious problem facing an aunt in a nursing home. In spite of the reassurances of the facility, Pryor's aunt was living in horrifying conditions that destroyed her dignity and threatened her health. Family and service to others were ideas that meant much to him, so Pryor decided to do something about it.

David Pryor, a Camden native, had been elected to Congress in 1966. He had previously been a newspaper publisher, lawyer, state legislator, and came from a family with a long history of public service in Ouachita County. As a member of Congress, he continually heard reassurances from nursing-home industry lobbyists and executives that the funding provided by state and federal governments went for the best care for patients and the few regulators that existed at the time found very few problems. Regulators would always announce their inspections in enough time for the nursing homes to pass, and lobby ists convinced states to weaken what few protections existed. Pryor had long scoffed at these assurances as stories like his aunt's continued to surface.

In the late 1960s, abuses of patients in nursing homes had become an epidemic across the nation. The elderly were beaten, health problems ignored, and medication was withheld or overdosed. Owners looked the other way to preserve their profits. Pryor decided that the only way to uncover the truth was to look for himself, away from the cameras, guided tours, and hearings in comfortable offices.

He decided that he would visit Washington, DC, area homes not as a congressman, but instead as a volunteer interested in serving as an orderly on nights and weekends.

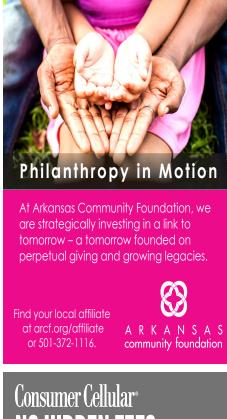
With his visits to 11 nursing homes, his findings were heartbreaking. He found patients covered in bedsores from neglect, small rooms crammed with a dozen or more beds, and patients left sitting in wheelchairs in their own waste. One home had only one employee to care for 80 people. Pryor found patients dumped at facilities by their families with nothing to do and no one to talk to. Patients had no means to move to better facilities and no way to lodge complaints or even contact family. Managers often did whatever it took to convince inspectors that nothing was wrong, and employees often threatened patients to stay quiet.

Pryor recounted in his autobiography that one elderly man, too frail to even cut his own toenails, resisted this basic service as the orderlies charged him \$7 each time. Pryor decided to do something about it. So there sat a United States Congressman, cutting the toenails of an old man forgotten by his family and friends and taking the time to listen to his stories.

By early 1970, the nursing home scandal broke after Pryor revealed his findings and media went into a frenzy. He worked over the course of months to set up hearings and gain support for legislation to help nursing home patients. He convinced both Democrats and Republicans to support creation of a House Committee on Aging, against the wishes of leadership in both parties and congressmen who had stock in nursing homes.

After his election as Arkansas governor in 1974, he won new regulations for Arkansas nursing homes and continued to push for better standards of treatment for patients. Other states slowly followed. After his election to the US Senate in 1978, he was named chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, where he continued his work to ensure that nursing homes provided quality care. Strict guidelines for care and hygiene and surprise visits by inspectors would become routine across the nation, though problems would persist for some care facilities. David Pryor had done something about it.

He remained a popular figure in the state as a champion for education, the elderly, and those in need. He would ultimately chair the Senate Committee on Aging between 1989 and 1995. Pryor retired from the Senate in 1997 and returned to Arkansas. He remained active in his retirement, serving on the Board of Directors for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, briefly chairing the Arkansas Democratic Party, and speaking to groups across the state, including many graduation ceremonies. He shared with students his expertise on his long political career, most notably teaching a political science course at the University of Arkansas in 2008. Pryor was known for his gentle demeanor and kindness. He died on April 20 at age 89.







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