

## *Herb Sturz, a Quiet Force in the Life of New York City, Dies at 90*

His agenda and reach, in government and out, extended from criminal justice to urban planning, though his constituency — prisoners, the homeless, the elderly and more — hardly knew his name.



By Sam Roberts

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Herb Sturz, a self-taught expert in criminal justice and urban planning who profoundly but inconspicuously influenced public policy across a remarkably broad range of issues in New York and beyond, died on Thursday in Tucson, Ariz. He was 90.

His niece Lisa Sturz said the cause was congestive heart failure. He lived in Manhattan, where he was injured in a fall two months ago and was recuperating in Tucson under his niece's care.

Over decades, in his various private and government incarnations, Mr. Sturz's agenda was wide and deep. He lobbied to release low-risk defendants who were being jailed for months before trial because they could not afford bail. He galvanized opposition to the Bloomberg administration's aggressive policing strategy, called stop-and-frisk. He secured a commitment from Mayor Bill de Blasio to eventually close the city's notorious short-term detention complex on Rikers Island. And as chairman of the New York City Planning Commission in the early 1980s, he set the stage for the transformation of Times Square into a thriving tourist destination.

Mr. Sturz was the founding director of the Vera Institute of Justice, a nonpartisan think tank; New York City's deputy mayor for criminal justice; and a member of The New York Times editorial board.

Whether as a supplicant seeking financial and political support for his nonprofit groups or as an insider turning government into a vehicle for reform, he forged public-private partnerships that advanced his social justice aims.

During a career that he described as “predicated in the doing,” his goals were manifested in dozens of programs, among them: The Manhattan Bowery Project, to treat rather than arrest alcoholics; Project Renewal, to provide jobs for the homeless; the Wildcat Service Corporation, to employ former addicts and offenders; the Midtown Community Court, to offer social services and impose alternative sentences for minor offenses; the City Volunteer Corps, which became a national model; and Easyride, to transport the elderly to medical appointments and other errands.

He was instrumental in establishing the After-School Corporation, to provide constructive activities for young people when regular classes end; Single Stop, to prepare prisoners for their release; ReServe, to place retired people in paid jobs in which their experience could be utilized; and the Center for New York City Neighborhoods, to mitigate the impact on homeowners of subprime mortgage foreclosures.

As a deputy mayor, Mr. Sturz established a government agency that evaluated whether defendants who could not afford cash bail could be counted on to return to court, enabling them to keep their jobs and family ties instead of languishing in jail for months awaiting trial.

“He would come back with results that were empirically tested,” Jay L. Kriegel, a friend and colleague who worked under Mayor John V. Lindsay, recalled in a phone interview for this obituary in 2017. “No absolutes. No dogma.” (Mr. Kriegel died in 2019.)

“I never heard Herb lecture anybody, and he knows more than anyone else involved,” Mr. Kriegel said. “That’s an extraordinary skill in dealing with very independent, powerful people and persuading them, seducing them, enticing them to become part of the process.”

Mr. Sturz’s municipal government legacy included the establishment of an Office of Immigrant Affairs, to help meet the needs of the roughly four in 10 New Yorkers who are foreign born, and a groundbreaking Victim Service Agency.

“Too often the victim has been left out of the system and is unaware of what’s happening, or if the case has been plea-bargained away,” Mr. Sturz said in 1986. “We have to make sure that he is not victimized again by the system itself.”

Peter C. Goldmark Jr., a fellow former city official and the former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, called Mr. Sturz “the best social engineer in America.”

Not all his ventures were successful.

“In order to succeed,” Mr. Sturz acknowledged, “you have to be ready to fail.”

He was bitterly disappointed in the mid-1980s when state lawmakers in Albany vetoed his vision of converting New York City’s jail on Rikers Island to a state prison, rather than shipping inmates to isolated institutions upstate. He also proposed opening short-term detention centers closer to the courts to speed hearings and trials, an initiative the de Blasio administration has agreed to carry out in every borough but Staten Island.

Mr. Sturz never gave up, though, in the face of setbacks. More than three decades later, armed with more convincing arguments as crime and the inmate census declined, he finally wore down city officials until they agreed in early 2017 to close the Rikers jail complex within a decade.

“This has been a driving force of his life,” said Jeremy Travis, a former president of John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York.

In opposing the stop-and-frisk policing program, which critics argued targeted Black and Hispanic young men disproportionately, Mr. Sturz was instrumental in the sharp curtailment of the practice by gathering statistical evidence of racial discrimination, promoting legal challenges and mobilizing political support.

“Herb became deeply involved and helped raise the visibility of the issue,” Mr. Travis said.

Mr. Sturz himself, however, remained largely invisible to the public. More than 800 articles about stop-and-frisk were published in The Times since 2010; none mentioned Mr. Sturz. Meanwhile, as crime continued to decline, the number of New Yorkers stopped by the police plummeted, from more than 685,000 in 2011 to about 12,000 in 2016.

Mr. Sturz in 2000. During a career that he described as “predicated in the doing,” his goals were manifested in dozens of social programs. Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

Herbert Jay Sturz was born on Dec. 31, 1930, in Bayonne, N.J., a gritty oil refining port just across from Staten Island, to Jacob and Ida (Meirowitz) Sturz. His father, a Jewish immigrant from Austria-Hungary, owned a local saloon with his brother.

Herb worked behind the bar as a teenager. And as a fan of the New York Giants baseball club, he was primed to root for underdogs.

After a bout with polio during high school dashed his hopes to play tournament tennis and left him with a withered right hand, he earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin and a master’s in education from Teachers College at Columbia.

Traveling in Europe, he met Elizabeth Lyttleton, with whom he wrote a well-reviewed novel about Spain, “Reapers of the Storm” (1958). They married in 1958. Ms. Sturz founded what became Argus Community, a program in the South Bronx for troubled youths, the mentally ill and drug addicts; she died in 2010.

Mr. Sturz is survived by his daughter, Anna Lomax Chairetakis Wood, a scholar with the Association for Cultural Equity at Hunter College; a step-grandson; a step-great-grandson; and, in addition to Lisa Sturz, several other nieces and nephews.

He married Margaret Shaw, a lawyer and mediator, in 2012. She died in 2017.

After editing Boys’ Life magazine, Mr. Sturz was recruited by Louis J. Schweitzer, a chemical engineer and philanthropist, in founding the Vera Institute of Justice in 1961. A research organization named for Mr. Schweitzer’s mother, it was established to address the inequities faced by indigent people who become entangled with law enforcement and the courts.

After directing Vera for 17 years, Mr. Sturz was picked by the newly elected Mayor Edward I. Koch in 1978 to be his deputy mayor for criminal justice. The next year he was named director of city planning, a job in which he curbed the height of mid-block high-rises, kicked off the redevelopment of Times Square and changed zoning rules to spare Broadway theaters from demolition.

After stepping down as director in 1986, he continued to press his agenda in print as a member of The Times editorial board and later through philanthropy, as a senior adviser to George Soros’s Open Society Foundations. There, he further expanded his purview to include bail reform abroad as well as affordable housing in South Africa.

Nearing 90, he continued to confront a catalog of seemingly intractable social problems with a consistent strategy of invoking firsthand research to transform skeptics into stakeholders.

In June 2019 he semi-retired to become a part-time, pro bono consultant to the Open Society Foundations.

Mr. Sturz’s “brief stints in government and journalism were little more than punctuation to an amazing freelance career in public service, what we now recognize as that of a ‘social entrepreneur,’” Joe Conason wrote in The New York Times Book Review about “A Kind of Genius: Herb Sturz and Society’s Toughest Problems” (2009), a book by this reporter.

Mr. Sturz achieved change through appointive posts; he lacked a discernible political power base to seek elective office, had he been so inclined. For the most part, his constituency was confined to the prisoners, the prostitutes, the addicts, the abused women, the underprivileged youths, the unemployed, the homeless, the poor and the elderly who never knew his name.

Jordan Allen contributed reporting.