

Luncheon Pays Homage to Pete

By Autumn Gray

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Sen. Pete Domenici's life flashed before him Thursday—and he savored every minute of it.

His school days at St. Mary's playing baseball with buddies who called him "Bocce" (his father had said he resembled the ball); his fateful failed run for governor that resulted in his 36 years in Congress; his diagnosis with a neurological disease.

About 450 New Mexicans honored the political icon's character and accomplishments over a lunch of salmon and risotto.

"Today we celebrate a young Italian," said Chuck Lanier, the first of 10 speakers and the past chairman of the Economic Forum, which organized the event. "He practiced law and then made the unselfish decision to become involved in politics to help our community."

"You have set the standard by which all members of Congress should be measured," said attorney and lifelong friend Bill Keleher, also among those who spoke onstage beside the often smiling, sometimes teary-eyed, gray-bearded senator.

Domenici's sixth six-year term ends in January. He announced in October his decision to retire because of a diagnosis of frontotemporal lobar degeneration. The brain disease can progress rapidly, causing debilitating effects on speech and dramatic personality changes.

And so it was appropriate that the Economic Forum gave the net proceeds from the event—\$20,000—to the nonprofit Mind Research Network, dedicated to improving the study of the brain and mental illness. The donation was matched, and then some, by pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, which gave \$75,000 in honor of the senator.

However, no one could have detected anything amiss on this day, just three weeks after his 76th birthday. The father of concise communication—he is known for hanging up the telephone on people who don't quickly get to the point—Domenici was thrilled to hear friends recount his accomplishments in a tight hour and a half.

"I'm sure that many of you are ready to be somewhere else," said the senator, who spoke last. "It's tough to give up this wonderful job you have given me. There's so many things left to be done. I've got to figure out a way to turn my mind off."

For more than three decades, Domenici's mind has raced from developing a comprehensive energy bill to supporting the state's national labs, from promoting Character Counts in schools to helping attract businesses such as Intel, General Mills and Emcore to Albuquerque.

Edward Lujan, chairman of the Manuel Lujan Agency, reminded attendees that the National Hispanic Cultural Center's education building, expected to open this fall, will carry Domenici's name. It was the senator who received from Congress \$17.9 million to help with the latter phases of the Cultural Center.

Most recently, in September, Domenici successfully pushed through the Senate a bill that would require equal health insurance coverage for mental and physical illness.

"His commitment to well-being brought mental illness to the forefront of public dialogue," said Robert Taichert, chairman of the board for the Mind Research Network, formerly the MIND Institute. Because of his efforts, the nation has "begun to successfully erase the stigma of mental illness."

Domenici made the network possible when in 1998 he received congressional appropriations of \$10 million for the study of mental illness, Taichert said. The network, which started off primarily studying schizophrenia (one of Domenici's daughters suffers from the disorder), now uses the latest technology to improve the noninvasive study of the brain and a range of mental illness, including addiction, autism and dementia. It also studies positive aspects of neuroscience such as infant brain development, creativity and intelligence.

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The network is housed in a 52,000-square-foot building named Nancy and Pete Domenici Hall on the University of New Mexico campus.

In 10 years, the nonprofit has grown from 40 employees to 130 employees. It has won \$30 million in competitive grants in the last 18 months, “so we won’t be depending on federal appropriations in the future,” CEO John Rasure told the Journal in a phone interview.

Rasure said the earmarks the network relied upon for so many years allowed it to develop into a sustainable business. It is now seeking \$1 million in unrestricted money to invest in the career development of young researchers.

While donations from Thursday’s lunch marked the inaugural gift for the Mind Discovery Fund, the day was really about honoring the man who made it all possible.

Described by former Gov. Garrey Carruthers as a “hugger” and a man “who walks among the people of New Mexico,” the senator, often referred to simply as “Pete,” was presented with an Excellence in Leadership award. The 75-pound green glass sculpture resembles two towers.

“I’m delighted if some people think I have made the job of the next senator pretty hard,” he told the crowd. “I think that’s OK.

“I’m going to miss it, but I have to do what I have to do.”