

Chairman Harkin's Biography

Tom Harkin is a product of small town Iowa who has not forgotten his origins. He was born November 19, 1939 to a coal miner father and a Slovenian immigrant mother who passed away when Tom was ten years old. Tom, his three brothers and two sisters and their parents shared a two-bedroom home in Cumming, Iowa (population 150). Tom is a fourth generation Iowan, a father of two, a Navy veteran, and a graduate of Iowa State University.

Growing up, the Harkin children learned well the importance of family, community, responsibility, and hard work. Tom puts those lessons to work for Iowa. He has earned a reputation for giving a voice to those too often overlooked in Washington: working families, women, people with disabilities, children, students, seniors, family farmers, and small business owners. In Congress, Tom is a recognized leader in areas including education, health care and agriculture.

Tom worked various jobs through his youth, on farms, as a paper boy, on construction sites, and at a Des Moines bottling plant. After graduating from Dowling High School in Des Moines, he attended Iowa State University on a Navy ROTC scholarship. He earned his degree at ISU in Government and Economics.

Following graduation from ISU, Tom joined the Navy where he served as a jet pilot on active duty from 1962 to 1967 and afterwards continued to fly in the Naval Reserves. He is an active member of American Legion Post 562 in Cumming.

In 1968, Tom married Ruth Raduenz, the daughter of a farmer and a school teacher from Minnesota. Tom and Ruth have two daughters: Amy, born in 1976, and Jenny, born in 1981. Ruth currently works on the Iowa Board of Regents.

Tom first came to Washington, D.C. in 1969 to join the staff of Iowa Congressman Neal Smith. As a staff member accompanying a congressional delegation to South Vietnam, he revealed to the world the infamous "tiger cages" inside a South Vietnamese prison camp at Con Son Island. Withstanding tremendous pressure to withhold the sensitive information, Tom's photographs and detailed account of the tiger cages were published in Life Magazine, exposing a cover-up and unearthing the shocking, inhuman conditions political prisoners were forced to endure. As a result, hundreds of tortured political prisoners were released.

In 1972, Tom and Ruth graduated from Catholic University of America Law School in Washington, D.C. and then returned to Iowa, settling in Ames. Tom worked as an attorney with the Polk County Legal Aid, assisting Iowans who could not otherwise afford legal help. Ruth won election as Story County Attorney.

Through his commitment to finding fair and responsible solutions and promoting common sense reform, Tom has earned broad-based support across Iowa. He first won election to the U.S. Congress from Iowa's Fifth Congressional District in 1974, defeating an incumbent in a long-standing Republican district.

Tom served in the House of Representatives for ten years and, in 1984, he again challenged an incumbent, winning election to the U.S. Senate. Iowans returned him to the U.S. Senate in 1990, 1996 and again in 2002, making him the first Iowa Democrat ever to earn a fourth Senate term.

He pioneered the use of "Work Days" in Iowa, days spent on the job working alongside fellow Iowans to gain both practical experience and a hands-on understanding of Iowa's needs. He has worked as a cop on the beat, school teacher, farmer, bricklayer, nurse's aide, and construction worker. And Tom was the first Member of the U.S. Congress to have a Mobile Office, the familiar Harkin van which brings the services of the U.S. Congress to all of Iowa's 99 counties.

Tom is a long-time leader in the fight to improve health care. As the Chairman on the Senate panel that funds health care initiatives, he has focused on prevention and early intervention programs that help reduce chronic disease, encourage healthier lifestyles, and lower health care costs.

Along with Republican Senator Arlen Specter, he led the effort to double medical research funding to eradicate diseases like cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer's. Since 2001, Tom has led the fight to expand embryonic stem cell research to provide hope for people with conditions like Parkinson's, ALS, and juvenile diabetes.

One of his newest priorities is to reorient the U.S. health care system towards wellness and prevention. Concerned by reports of rising obesity and preventable illness, Tom introduced the Healthy Lifestyles and Prevention (HeLP) America Act. This legislation takes a comprehensive approach that encourages healthier lifestyles, focuses on nutrition, physical activity, mental health and tobacco cessation.

As co-chair of the Senate Rural Health Caucus, he's successfully pushed legislation to bring health professionals to small towns and rural areas. He's put particular emphasis on women's health, doubling funding for breast cancer research and launching a national breast and cervical cancer early detection program.

As the Chairman of the Senate education funding subcommittee, Tom has worked hard to improve education in Iowa and across the country. He has worked to reduce class size, to give students better computer and Internet access, expand school counseling and other school safety programs, and improve teacher training. Tom has also taken the lead in pushing to modernize America's crumbling schools. He secured funding for "Harkin Grants" to modernize and repair Iowa's public schools.

Tom's brother, Frank, was deaf since childhood, so Tom knows firsthand the challenges facing Americans with disabilities. He authored the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the landmark legislation that protects the civil rights of more than 54 million Americans with physical and mental disabilities. He's also led efforts to improve educational opportunities for children with disabilities.

As a lifelong advocate for America's family farms and rural communities, Tom is the Chairman of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee.

He has promoted new uses and markets for agricultural products, like ethanol, and fought to restore security to family farmers through improved farm income protection. Tom has also increased support for conservation, improved demand and prices for farm commodities and devoted attention and resources to revitalize the economies of Iowa's rural communities and small towns.

In 2002, he authored the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act. There he created the Conservation Security program to provide financial incentives to farmers and ranchers who adopt and maintain sound conservation practices on land in agricultural production. He also established the first-ever renewable energy title. He intends to expand and strengthen both these initiatives in the next farm bill, which he is working to develop this year.