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Barry Nestande dies after collapsing during workout at the gym

State assemblyman's brother was longtime aide, friend to Benoit

COLIN ATAGI • THE DESERT SUN • MARCH 20, 2010

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Friends and family members today are mourning the death of Barry Nestande — the brother of state Assemblyman Brian Nestande — who served as chief of staff for Riverside County Supervisor John Benoit. He was 49.

ADVERTISEMENT Barry Nestande died at John F. Kennedy Memorial Center in Indio just after 3 p.m. Friday, Benoit said.

He was riding an exercise bicycle at World Gym in La Quinta when he may have suffered a heart attack, the supervisor said, adding that he felt "lousy" about his friend's death.

"(Barry Nestande) was closer to me than a brother," Benoit said Friday night. "It'll be a huge hole in my life."

The two men met in 2002 when Benoit was elected to the California Assembly.

Prior to serving Benoit, Nestande spent years working in politics and in the financial arena and insurance industry.

"He's been my one and only chief of staff since my very first day in the state Assembly," Benoit said. "I don't know too many members of the Legislature (who) have the same chief of staff for seven years."

Benoit left the Legislature this past November after he was appointed to the county board following the death of Supervisor Roy Wilson.

News of Barry Nestande's death spread quickly across the Coachella Valley on Friday night, with several prominent officials expressing shock.

"I just couldn't believe it; it's unbelievable," Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley said. "It's just hard to accept."

Friends described Nestande committed, charismatic and irreplaceable.

Rancho Mirage City Councilman Dana Hobart said he been friends with Nestande for eight years. The two had lunch about two weeks ago.

And as usual, Hobart said, they "talked politics, social issues and family."

"We would get philosophical and shared certain (theories) and differed in others and we'd debate them," Hobart said.

Darlene Casella, acting president of Rancho Mirage Republican Women, who said she'd known Nestande for about six years, often suggested that he run for state office himself, but he'd say it just wasn't his thing.

"He always said he had no interest and would say that 'I'm a behind-the-scenes guy,'" she said.

Although he was known for his role as a political insider and his interests in that area, Nestande's main love was his family, friends said.

Nestande "dedicated his life to his family and the causes he believed in," U.S. Rep. Mary Bono Mack said in a statement Saturday.

"Barry was a tireless advocate and a friend, and his many contributions have made a truly positive difference in our community. We grieve the loss of Barry but know that his memory will live on in our hearts," she said.



Barry Nestande

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Nestande leaves behind his a wife of seven years, Merrilee; their son, Brett, 6; and a stepson, Tyson, 21.

His brother, Brian Nestande R-Palm Desert, could not be reached for comment Friday night.

Details of funeral services are pending.

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