

Board Profile: Stewart Udall

Stewart Udall is the first and has been the only Chairman of the Board of Think New Mexico since its inception more than three years ago.

During his tenure, he has been known to make cameo appearances before the state legislature and editorial boards to boost Think New Mexico policy recommendations when they were not progressing quite fast enough. (Stewart also runs a crisp board meeting: although everyone has an ample opportunity to participate, you never want to pause too long between thoughts or you may lose your turn to speak.)

However, it is his iconoclasm that makes this former New Frontiersman the ideal person to lead our small, but ambitious organization in our uphill battles against the status quo and conventional political wisdom in New Mexico.

After serving three terms in Congress and eight years as Interior Secretary under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, Stewart rejected the more lucrative job opportunities available to someone of his stature had he remained in Washington D.C.. He and Lee chose instead to move back West.

Eventually he moved to New Mexico in part to represent Navajo uranium miners and their widows. Because of the perceived urgencies of the Cold War, these humble Navajo people had not been warned of the dangers of cancer associated with exposure to radiation in the mines. After losing a series of court cases over a dozen years, Stewart ultimately won passage of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act in Congress and with it a large measure of justice for his clients.

He grew up in a Mormon farm village in St. John's, Arizona just across the state line from Catron County, New Mexico. Stewart, however, was not much of a farmer as his brother, Burr, now laughingly recalls. "We would go out in the morning, and you could count on it – pretty soon Stewart's horses would be wandering around without Stewart because he'd be off somewhere thinking about some big world problem, Hitler or something."

Agriculture's loss was government's (and Think New Mexico's) gain and now Stewart has passed on what he calls the "defective [political] gene" to his son, Tom, who represents New Mexico in Congress.

