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Opinion: ‘Steve Cohen has served Memphis extraordinarily well’

By [G. Scott Morris](#), Special to The Daily Memphian

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Steve Cohen has represented Tennessee’s 9th Congressional District since 2007. (Noah McLane/Special to The Daily Memphian file)

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY MEMPHIAN

G. Scott Morris



The Rev. Dr. G. Scott Morris, M.D., is founder of Church Health. He is a regular contributor to The Daily Memphian.

I first got to know Congressman Steve Cohen more than 35 years ago because I needed his help. It was 1990. Cohen was a state senator, and I

had an idea that I believed could help working Memphians who didn't have health insurance.

The idea became the Memphis Plan. Doctors were willing to volunteer their time caring for working people who couldn't afford health insurance. The need was there. The willingness was there. The problem was that my idea was illegal in Tennessee. I would need to find a way to change the law.

Opinion: I wish the rest of America understood what I know about Memphis

I knew something about medicine. I knew nothing about getting a bill through the Tennessee General Assembly.

Cohen did.

He listened, understood what we were trying to accomplish and shepherded the Memphis Plan Act through the legislature. It became law in 1991.

In the years since, the Memphis Plan has helped thousands of working but uninsured Memphians receive medical care. I have never forgotten Cohen's role in making that possible.

It was my first lesson in something I would come to understand about Steve Cohen over the next three decades: He believes public office should be used to help people.

There is something else about Cohen that I have come to appreciate over the years. He had polio as a child, and I have seen him struggle with the lasting effects it has had on his legs. Walking and standing can require an effort most of us never have to think about. Yet I have watched him keep going, from one event to another, often staying longer than you would expect,

without asking anyone to feel sorry for him.

Opinion: Local government matters, and every vote counts

Over the years, I have often found myself with him at small events in some of the poorest parts of Memphis. There were no television cameras. There weren't many votes in the room and certainly not many campaign contributions. But Cohen was there.

Sometimes I knew that simply being there physically required more from him than it did from the rest of us. He showed up anyway. Eventually, I stopped thinking of it as a coincidence. He showed up because these were his constituents. There is a kind of public service that happens when everyone is watching, and there is another kind that happens when hardly anyone is.

Perhaps that explains why a white, Jewish man has for decades represented a majority, minority community. In a place as diverse and complex as Memphis, the trust he has found is remarkable.

Cohen's time for political public service is coming to an end. He has spent nearly half a century serving this community; first on the Shelby County Commission, then for 24 years in the Tennessee Senate, and since 2007 representing Tennessee's 9th Congressional District in Congress.

His record in Nashville was substantial. He fought for civil rights, government ethics and the arts; and of course, there was the Tennessee Lottery.

Opinion: Don't confuse nationalism with patriotism

In principle, I am not a fan of gambling, but it is hard to look

away from the impact on higher education in Tennessee that billions of dollars from the lottery have offered in scholarships to kids who could never have afforded school. Cohen spent 20 years fighting for the lottery when people told him it would never happen.

Cohen can be stubborn. But stubbornness in pursuit of something worthwhile has another name: persistence. It has led him to be remarkably effective at bringing federal resources to Memphis. It is something I fear we will miss when his tenure ends at the end of this year.

Success at bringing to one's community federal funding as a member of Congress requires understanding the federal bureaucracy, building relationships, and knowing the appropriations process. These are all things Cohen has been exceedingly good at since he first went to Washington.

He has helped bring major federal investments to Memphis to redevelop Foot Homes, to build the Main Street to Main Street Connector and Big River Crossing, public safety, parks and historic preservation. He helped bring federal resources to address the shameful backlog of untested sexual assault kits. He has recently helped secure funding for projects for Clayborn Temple and Mason Temple. The total amount is in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Opinion: Safety isn't only the absence of danger — it's also the presence of connection

The numbers, however, don't tell the whole story. Federal dollars become something when they reach Memphis. They become housing for families. A park where children play. A safer neighborhood. A historic building preserved for another

generation.

Not every federal grant awarded in Memphis belongs to Steve Cohen's scorecard. Talented people throughout our city develop programs and write competitive applications. But congressional advocacy matters.

It matters to have someone who knows the agencies, knows the process and knows which door to knock on. After all these years, Cohen knows a lot of doors.

What strikes me is the connection between the congressman fighting for millions of dollars for Memphis in Washington and the man I have seen standing in a small room with a handful of poor Memphians back home.

They are really the same thing. Both are about showing up. At Church Health, I have spent much of my life thinking about what makes people healthy. It isn't just about the doctors and medicine. It's having a decent home, transportation to work, a safe neighborhood and the belief that you matter to your community.

Opinion: Why Christians across Tennessee should oppose redistricting

That's why I still remember 1990. There were people who needed medical care, an idea that might help them and a state law standing in the way. Steve Cohen helped change the law. More than three decades later, people are still benefiting from what he did. To me, that's public service.

I haven't agreed with Cohen on everything. I don't imagine many people have. But agreement isn't the standard by which a lifetime of public service should be measured.

Service is.

Did you show up?

Did you use the office entrusted to you to improve people's lives?

Did you remember people without power?

Did you bring something home?

Opinion: Diversity matters in almost everything we do

And sometimes, did you show up even when showing up wasn't easy?

By those measures, Cohen has served Memphis extraordinarily well.

So, thank you, Congressman Cohen.

Thank you for listening to a young doctor with an idea in 1990. Thank you for making the Memphis Plan possible. Thank you for all those times I have seen you show up when there was nothing politically to gain from being there, and when I knew that simply getting there wasn't easy. Thank you for fighting for the lottery and the opportunities it created. Thank you for going to Washington, learning how that complicated place works and using that knowledge to bring resources home.

Most of all, for nearly half a century, thank you for believing that all of Memphis is worth showing up for.

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