

Joseph P. Overton's Living Legacy

by Joseph G. Lehman, Mackinac Center executive vice president

Joseph P. Overton was the indispensable man. His passing last year was as devastating as it was sudden. Yet his contributions to the Mackinac Center and the freedom movement have proved so powerful that they now provide the means by which we advance without him.

Until that awful evening last summer when Joe — our colleague, friend and senior vice president — was killed in the crash of his ultralight aircraft, his larger-than-life leader-



Gisèle Huff (left) of the Jaquelin Hume Foundation and Lynn Harsh (right) of the Evergreen Freedom Foundation celebrate after receiving awards at the State Policy Network's Annual Meeting in October 2003. Harsh was honored with the inaugural Overton Award.

ship, passion and accomplishments had made his death seem unimaginable. Abruptly, the "unimaginable" became the severest test in the Mackinac Center's history.

Amid our shock and grief, we resolved to surmount our loss, as Joe would have counseled.

More than a year later, I am deeply grateful to say we have succeeded. I believe the same Divine Providence that numbered Joe's days also ordained

the success of our last, most difficult year. Five achievements stand out, each of them a Mackinac Center "first":

- We secured the largest pure research grant we have ever received — nearly \$1 million for education policy, from the Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation.
- We added to our full-time staff a former state government department chief: Russ Harding, past director of the Department of Environmental Quality, and now our senior environmental policy analyst.
- A sitting federal cabinet official addressed a Mackinac Center audience, when U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige commended our calls for school choice in a speech to our boards of advisors.
- Former Gov. John Engler, who helped found the Mackinac Center, keynoted a Center gathering of business leaders and called on them to support the Center financially.

- We won a landmark legal victory for free speech, when with the help of the Washington-D.C.-based Institute for Justice, we defeated a lawsuit the Michigan Education Association filed against us after we quoted their president in our fundraising letter. The suit was apparently calculated to intimidate the Center and silence our voice on education reform.



Mackinac Center President Lawrence Reed speaks to an audience at the dedication of the Overton Library.

Each of these "firsts" bears Joe's imprint. But as hard as it is to imagine them without the foundation he helped build, it is completely impossible to imagine them without the leadership and hard work of our current staff. We are honoring the legacy of an indispensable man by achieving new heights after he is gone.

* * *

Joe has also been commemorated more concretely in the past year, in ways designed to inspire leaders to advance free markets and individual liberty in the future:

- The State Policy Network inaugurated the Overton Award, which will be given from time to time to a leader who advances sound public policy at the state level. Lynn Harsh, the "indispensable woman" of Washington State's Evergreen Freedom Foundation, was the first honoree.
- The Mackinac Center named its economics, law and public policy library the "Joseph P. Overton Library," in a ceremony led by Mackinac Center President Lawrence Reed and attended by friends and associates of Joe, and Joe's widow, Helen.
- Kenya's first free-market policy institute established a "Joseph P. Overton Leadership Center," in a ceremony attended by Reed and his assistant, Kendra Shrode.

Thus does Joe's legacy continue — a living legacy of hope, progress and freedom. We are working hard to make this legacy as indispensable as the man himself.

More about Joseph P. Overton's life can be found at www.mackinac.org/5513. I