

The WAGER, Vol. 3(3) - A tribute to Tom Cummings, Jan 21, 1921 - Jan 12, 1998

January 20, 1998

Thomas N. Cummings of Braintree, Massachusetts, founder and Executive Director Emeritus of the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, died unexpectedly Monday in Massachusetts General Hospital. He was 76. A special friend and colleague, Tom helped to found and support The WAGER.

Tom was born in Boston and graduated from Mission High School before serving in the Army Reserve in Trinidad during World War II. After the war, he earned a Bachelor's degree in business administration at Boston University in 1950. He sold insurance for several years until 1960, when he began a 25-year career as a teacher. He taught English and career studies at Martin Luther King Jr. High School, Charlestown High School, and the Humphrey Occupational Resource Center. Over the years, he developed a gambling problem, which he overcame with the help of friends with similar problems, 12-step programs, and professional therapists. All who knew Tom can state that his considerable energy and motivation was fueled by his own experience as a compulsive gambler. Tom's focus was on recovery; through his own process of recovery Tom helped many gamblers and their families.

In 1983, with limited funds, he founded the Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling, a nonprofit referral service for problem gamblers and their families, which he operated for a time on a phone over his kitchen table. Four months later, he received state funding for an office in the financial district in Boston. In 1988, when the first state-funded treatment center for problem gamblers and their families opened at Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Tom considered it a personal triumph. Recently, Tom celebrated the funding of 15 additional treatment programs for gambling problems in Massachusetts.

Tom was a charming man and a persuasive speaker who was often quoted in the Boston Globe and other newspapers as an expert on gambling issues. "I don't oppose gambling per se," he said in an interview in 1992. "I don't say the Massachusetts Lottery or the [horse and dog] tracks create compulsive gamblers .

. . . but it is my job to point out to the state that with more gambling comes more problems.” Tom was a familiar figure in the state legislature, where he often testified on legislation involving gambling. He was a critic of the state lottery and other forms of state-sponsored gambling. “Massachusetts has a gambling problem now. Even with no expansion to legalized gambling, about 4% of the state’s population are problem or compulsive gamblers, and their numbers are increasing as accessibility to gambling grows,” he wrote in a column published in the Boston Globe on June 22, 1994. “Too many lives, too many businesses, too many communities are suffering under the yoke of state-sponsored, legalized gambling,” he wrote. Tom was a maverick and an innovator whose tireless efforts and deeply felt passion will continue to influence the gambling field. His open thinking and ongoing interest in new ideas challenged many established tenets. We celebrate Tom’s distinguished life. Everyone interested in disordered gambling owes him a great debt. We will miss his laughter, creativity, and support. His legacy will live on in all those who had the privilege of knowing Tom and working with him.

Source: Long, T. (January 15, 1998). Thomas Cummings, 76; teacher, helped compulsive gamblers. The Boston Globe, D17.

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