Newborn hearing screening has become the standard of care in the United States due in large part to the foresight and efforts of Thomas R. Behrens who passed away on Wednesday, March 25, 2009 after a long battle with cancer.

Born in Switzerland in 1931, Tom was a special education teacher in Zurich when he discovered that his oldest daughter was deaf. Shortly thereafter, Tom and his family moved to the United States for a graduate study program with Helmer Mykelbust at Northwestern University in Chicago. He received his PhD in Language Pathology and Psychology of Deafness from Northwestern University in 1963. After serving as an Assistant Professor at Northwestern from 1963 to 1965, he moved to Washington DC to become the director of the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School at Gallaudet University where he was a Professor of Education and the Director of the Department of Education. In 1973, Tom moved to the federal Department of Education where he served as a Branch Chief and Division Director in what is now the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

It was during his time at OSEP that Tom worked to implement newborn hearing screening programs in the United States. Much of his work was done behind the scenes and he never sought recognition for his efforts, but many of us believe that he did more than any other person to make universal newborn hearing screening a reality. The Rhode Island Hearing Assessment Project was his idea, he convinced David Kemp to work with the project to test the feasibility of using otoacoustic emissions in a universal newborn hearing screening program, and he guided the project from its initiation to its successful completion. He was instrumental in getting the Surgeon General of the United States (Dr. C. Everett Koop) to include a goal to screen all babies for hearing loss in the Healthy People 2000 goals and he was actively involved in the 1993 NIH Consensus Development Conference that concluded that all newborns should be screened for hearing loss before leaving the hospital. A few years later, he worked closely with his good friend Dr. Louis Z. Cooper, who was then serving as the President of the American Academy of
Pediatrics, to get the Academy more fully engaged in promoting newborn hearing screening by creating the EHDI (Early Hearing Detection and Intervention) Chapter Champions program which has now spread throughout the United States. With virtually every major step forward that has been made in newborn hearing screening during the last 20 years, if you look closely in the shadows, you will find the guiding hand and innovative thinking of Tom Behrens, quietly and persistently making it a success.

Tom had big ideas and endless energy to implement those ideas. He was connected with everyone and worked tirelessly to help deaf infants and young children and their families. His voice was gruff, his advice was blunt, and his approach was often unorthodox, but people learned to listen and to follow his advice because he was smart and creative in the implementation strategies he suggested, and everyone who knew him was impressed with the greatness of his heart and the purity of his motives. He was a champion who accomplished much and left the world a much better place for deaf children and their families.

We miss his intellect, his energy, his integrity and those lists he kept on the 3x5 cards in his pocket. When we paid attention to his advice (see below), we were always more successful. And although we miss him, we are better for having known and having been taught by him.

A memorial service will be held for Tom at 1:30 PM on Monday, April 13th at St. David’s Episcopal Church located at 5150 Macomb Street, NW in Washington DC, 20016. The church and parish house are located at the corner of Macomb and Klingle Streets, one block east of MacArthur Boulevard and two blocks west of Loughboro Road. The D6 and D3 Buses stop at the corner of Macomb Street and MacArthur Boulevard on their way to Sibley Hospital and District of Columbia-Maryland border, three blocks away.