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Colman Genn Is Dead at 68; Exposed School Corruption

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Colman Genn, a career educator who exposed corruption in New York City schools by secretly recording conversations about political and ethnic considerations in filling jobs, died on Thursday night at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset. He was 68.

The cause was respiratory failure, said his son, David.

Mr. Genn was the superintendent of Community School Board 27 in southeastern Queens when, in the fall of 1989, he became the star witness in hearings to investigate allegations that elected school board members had awarded dozens of unnecessary jobs to friends and political supporters at a cost of more than \$1 million a year.

Mr. Genn became celebrated as the Serpico of the public school system after volunteering to wear a recording device and tape hours of conversations over a period of eight months in his office, at board meetings, in cars and restaurants and on the phone for the Joint Commission on Integrity in the Public Schools, informally known as the Gill Commission, appointed by Mayor Edward I. Koch in 1988.

"I'm a political leader; that's why I'm here," James C. Sullivan, a member of the community school board and former Republican district leader, was heard telling Mr. Genn on one such recording. At another point, discussing jobs ranging from assistant principal to school aide, Mr. Sullivan complained that Mr. Genn's predecessor had "hired out of the synagogue," to the detriment of Irish-Americans, and instructed that any black person hired had to be "pliable," and not "a Mau-Mau."

The city's 32 community school boards grew out of a 1969 state law aimed at giving community leaders and parents, especially in minority neighborhoods, a voice in the running of public schools. The conversations recorded by Mr. Genn, who became the highest-ranking official willing to discuss corruption publicly, led gradually to state legislation recentralizing the school system over the last few years.

In January 1991, Mr. Genn, then 56, retired from his superintendent's job with two and a half years remaining in his contract. He said he was smoking a pack and a half of cigarettes a day, his asthma had worsened, his weight was fluctuating and he was under police guard for fear of retribution.

"I'm tense and worried that I've made a lot of enemies, that people whose toes have been stepped on will come at me in one way or another," he said at the time.

He said he found comfort in riding his motorcycle on the beach.

He found a sanctuary of sorts with a friend and former colleague, Seymour Fliegel, who had helped create small, experimental public schools in East Harlem and who invited him to become a senior fellow at a research institute supporting public education, now known as the Center for Educational Innovation-Public Education Association. The group was initially part of the Manhattan Institute, the conservative research center, but later split to become independent.

Mr. Genn was born on Dec. 11, 1935, in the Bronx. His father, Bernard, was a ritual slaughterer preparing kosher meat, a diamond cutter and later the director of a children's camp. His mother, Fannie, was a homemaker who never finished high school but was well-read in Talmud. Mr. Genn, one of five children, was educated at Yeshiva Etzchaim and Yeshiva University High School in Brooklyn, where he recalled spending a lot of time on the street looking for fights with a gang of youths in Bensonhurst, and being a "very poor" student.

He earned a bachelor's degree in health and physical education from Brooklyn College, then a master's degree in the same fields from Michigan State. He got his first job, teaching math at Brownsville Junior High, in 1958, then went on to teach physical education and social studies in East Harlem. During the 1970's and 80's, working with the local superintendents, Anthony Alvarado and Carlos Medina, and the deputy superintendent, Mr. Fliegel, he helped start three alternative schools in East Harlem: the Academy of Environmental Sciences, the Harbor School for the Performing Arts and the Manhattan Center for Science and Math.

Mr. Genn became the superintendent of District 27 in July 1987, and realized from his first months on the job that something was amiss, as board members inquired about hiring and promoting friends and cronies.

Just two weeks before Mr. Genn died, he traveled to Israel to help create a school for immigrant children, Mr. Fliegel said.