Identifying a role model who personifies greatness and leadership and who inspires young people to reach their full potential is a challenge. Some may point to historical icons like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa. Montanans, however, do not have to look too far. One deeply revered leader is Senator and Ambassador Mike Mansfield. Many fondly remember him for his quiet but decisive leadership of and tireless service in the U.S. Senate as its Majority Leader and for his foreign policy acumen in the U.S. Congress and as US Ambassador to Japan that helped navigate the country through some crucial periods of U.S.-Asia relations. Although he died more than ten years ago, I believe his life and legacy is still relevant today, especially as a powerful inspiration for students across Montana. To see how, we need to look more closely at his early life before he entered politics and when he was a struggling young man chasing a dream. Despite his humble beginnings, his tremendous life achievements make him not only a role model to follow but also a poignant example that life’s hard knocks and setbacks do not have to be permanently crippling to one’s future.

Montanans who remember Senator Mansfield often overlook that he had a troubled youth. His mother died early and his father sent Mike and his sister to their uncle and aunt in Great Falls, Montana. He was a strong willed child with a tendency to run away and was a mediocre student at best. Mike was an avid reader, but he did not like school. He eventually dropped out at the age of 14 and joined the Navy, then later the Army and the Marine Corps. His overseas
assignments in the Marine Corps opened his eyes to China, Japan and Southeast Asia and ignited a deep interest in Asian history, culture, and politics. Today, knowing his complete life’s journey, we can look back now and celebrate the youthful adventurism during his early years that laid the groundwork for his future career in national politics, but back then, these were not clear signs of an emerging leader. Moreover, upon leaving the military, rather than going back to school to pursue his newfound passion, he saw his immediate future tied to copper mining in the mines of Butte.

Fortunately for Mike (and of course, Montana), key people in his life saw his true potential to pursue bigger dreams and did not give up on him. His then fiancee, Maureen, encouraged him to finish school, enter college and follow his dream to study Asian history. She later married this penniless student and sacrificed her own career and financial security to help him fulfill his dream.

At the University of Montana, Mike was a non-traditional student - entering college nearly ten years later than most of his peers. Despite this delay in his education, a few professors saw promise in this tall, gangly former miner. They provided academic and financial support to help him finish his educational training and start his teaching career at the University of Montana. These important life accomplishments, of course, became the backdrop and the springboard for his future successful political career.

In short, today, although we celebrate Senator Mike Mansfield’s life as an exemplary demonstration of how one man can make a difference in shaping Montana, the United States
and our world, it also highlights how a supportive school community that provides training and opportunities, caring mentors and wise companions can build up a great leader. Furthermore, one’s troubled background does not have to be a permanent setback to one’s future and potential. Hard work, passion and great teachers can open a world of possibilities for students.

As the new director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana, my goal is to retell the story of the late Senator to a new generation and to challenge Montanan students to think globally and to reach their full potential. In the coming months, the Center will bring national and international leaders to the university campus to talk about their work and share their personal journeys. In addition, we will develop and organize outreach programs, seminars and research projects on Asia, ethics and leadership. With each effort, we will involve students, teachers and members of the broader Montanan community to connect this great state to the world. Our aim is to open the eyes of students and citizens to the challenges and possibilities in our world and to engage the hearts of many in Montana to take ownership of some of our world problems as their own to dedicate their lives to solve. I am confident that in our midst there are many more Mike Mansfield-like leaders to come.

Although Senator Mansfield is no longer with us, I think this is the best way to continue paying tribute to this great man and the best way to pass on his story to a new generation.