

An appointment with

By BILL BELL

LONG BEFORE he arranged the appointment at the Layton and Sherman law firm, on the ninth floor of 90 Rockefeller Plaza, the people who knew Dennis Sweeney even casually realized that there was something seriously wrong with him.

Among them was Allard K. Lowenstein, one of the firm's lawyers who agreed to see Sweeney at 4 p.m. on this day, March 14, 1980.

They were not strangers in the usual sense of the word. And yet they were.

Lowenstein, 51, one of the major political and civil rights figures of the turbulent '60s, and Sweeney, 37, had met at Stanford University two decades earlier, when Lowenstein was a political science teacher and Sweeney a bright 18-year-old college freshman.

There was something magic about Lowenstein, the Newark-born son of a doctor who abandoned his career to go into the restaurant business. As a teenager, Al, as he was always called, already was honing his talents for persuasion and inspiration—and was sharpening an intense interest in the plight of the victims of injustice, whether in South Africa or Mississippi. Later, like some kind of radical Pied Piper, he would lead a generation of young activists into battle on a dozen ideological fronts.

"As a kid," he said many years later, "I was always being beaten up and I was funny looking. I ended up feeling left out. I find I can always identify with people who are left out."

In 1949, as a student at the University of North Carolina, which Lowenstein selected because of its wrestling program (it was his favorite sport), he first became involved in politics, as a Democratic state senator's aide. He was 20 years old. In 1952, when Adlai E. Stevenson ran for President, Lowenstein was national chairman of Students for Stevenson and president of the National Student Association.

He was traveling through Mississippi in 1962 when the newly organized Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee asked him to recruit clean-cut white volunteers to help the black cause in the South. Lowenstein did so.

Early the following year, Sweeney became one of the first volunteers. A neat, sincere 6-footer and history major from Portland, Ore., he fitted the model of concerned, tireless activism to a T. His father was a military man who had died in the early '50s in a plane crash, and after his mother remarried, he was adopted, at age 14, by his stepfather, Gabriel Sweeney.

Dennis Sweeney was among the most militant and

death

devoted volunteers in Mississippi, and his bravery and loyalty were tested several times, twice when bombs planted by white supremacists exploded where he was working and living.

Meanwhile, Lowenstein was moving into the less radical orbit of Martin Luther King, who appointed him as a board member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (and until he explained to King that he was Jewish, he was listed as "the Rev. Allard K. Lowenstein" in organization literature).

Sweeney eventually drifted back to Stanford, just in time to become active in the anti-Vietnam War movement. By 1967, he was openly, publicly denouncing Lowenstein as a traitor to true civil rights causes.

By then, however, Lowenstein had moved on to other causes. In 1963, he helped moderate black Democrats in Mississippi organize a delegation to challenge the old white-guard delegation at the party's national convention. Then, in 1967, while Sweeney was denouncing him, Lowenstein began putting together the "dump Johnson" coalition that

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would eventually help drive LBJ out of politics. Lowenstein suddenly was a national political figure.

In 1968, it paid off at the polls. He was elected a U.S. congressman from a Nassau County district that he barely knew. Two years later, he was unseated and, although he would seek election six more times in various congressional districts, he would never win another election.

As the causes and the heroes of the '60s faded, so did Lowenstein's influence. But not his visibility—he continued his old frenetic pace, lecturing, traveling, exhorting and practicing law.

In 1976, Lowenstein was an adviser in Gov. Jerry Brown's campaign for President, and, a year later, President Carter named him to the U.S. delegation to the UN. By now, Lowenstein was bragging that he ranked seventh on the so-called "Nixon enemies list."

Meanwhile, Sweeney's life became a hellish mess.

His four-year marriage to a civil rights co-worker broke up (she later married President Jimmy Carter's medical adviser). He couldn't hold a job. He began telling people in Portland that he was under the control of creatures from outer space. Later, he claimed the CIA and the FBI had planted electrodes in the fillings of his teeth to keep him under radio control. At some point, he dug out his fillings and bridgework. But he still claimed that agents were controlling him, and now he was saying that Lowenstein was directing the agents.

After an Oregon psychiatrist described him as a paranoid schizophrenic, Sweeney's family tried to institutionalize him. Instead, using money given him by several friends, he went to Connecticut, where he underwent private psychiatric treatment for a few months in 1975. He also moved into an apartment in New London, where he worked as a carpenter.

"He was kind of weird," his landlady would say later. "He thought everybody was after him and things like that."

Early in March 1980, he paid a Connecticut gun

dealer \$120 for a Spanish-made Llama .380 automatic pistol. Since he had no criminal record, Connecticut authorities gave him a state pistol permit. About the same time, Sweeney also called Lowenstein and said he wanted to see him. Lowenstein, never one to turn his back on an old political friend (or foe), set the appointment for 4 p.m. on March 14.

When he arrived, three minutes late, Sweeney was met with a smile and a handshake by Lowenstein. After a few words, the two men went into Lowenstein's office.

A minute or two later, there was a shout, followed by several sharp noises. A telephone installer working in a nearby office said, "I heard screams and then pops—three or four."

Another member of the telephone crew looked up to see a man enter the law firm's reception room, place a pistol in a secretary's in-basket, light a cigaret, and sit silently in a chair.

By the time police arrived, Rockefeller Center security guards had handcuffed Sweeney, and emergency medical technicians were placing Lowenstein on a stretcher for a race to St. Clare's Hospital, nearly six blocks away. At 4:38 p.m., Lowenstein entered the emergency room. He had been struck in the heart, lungs and left arm by five bullets.

As a team of six doctors worked frantically to save Lowenstein, friends and relatives streamed into the hospital. At 11:03 p.m., a hospital spokesman broke the news—Al Lowenstein had just died. Amid tears, his family and friends began singing 1960s protest songs. They were still singing when Sen. Edward Kennedy, an old Lowenstein friend, arrived from Chicago.

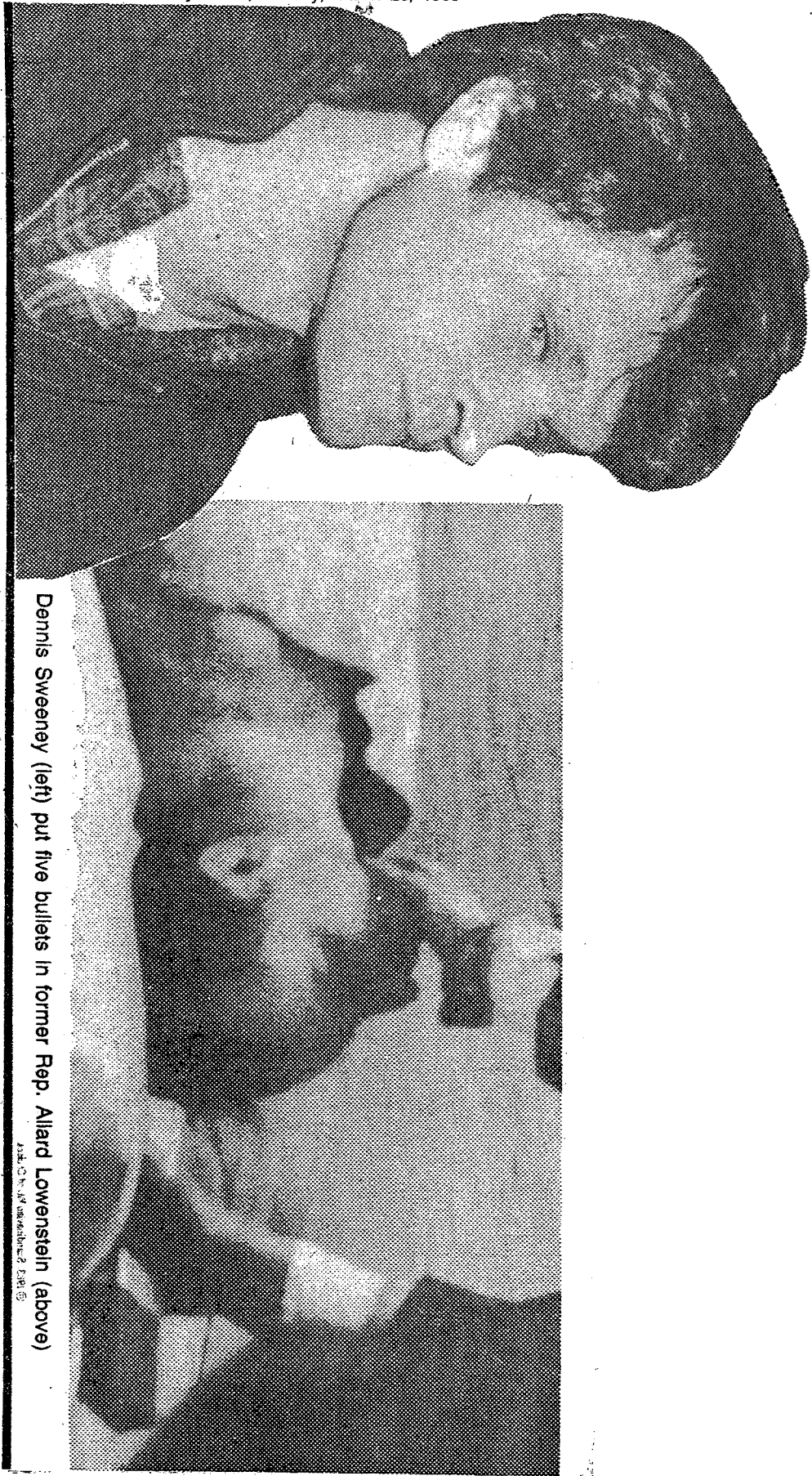
Meanwhile, police had booked Sweeney, who said that, yes, he shot Lowenstein. The reason, he said, was that Lowenstein was responsible for the death of his stepfather, Gabriel Sweeney, who had died the previous month of a heart attack caused by worry over a lawsuit in which Lowenstein represented the other party. (Lowenstein, it later turned out, had nothing to do with the case).

ON MARCH 18, Kennedy, Hugh Carey, Ed Koch, Andy Young, William F. Buckley, Jackie Onassis, members of the cabinet, White House officials, members of Congress and scores of old political and civil rights figures attended a memorial service for Al Lowenstein at the Central Synagogue on Lexington Ave. At the end, Harry Chapin and Peter Yarrow, of the Peter, Paul and Mary folksinging trio, sang "Amazing Grace."

As a onetime U.S. congressman, Lowenstein was entitled to burial in the Arlington National Cemetery, and there, on March 19, he was laid to rest among America's heroes, and only a few yards from the grave of Robert F. Kennedy.

At first, Sweeney pleaded innocent to the murder charge, but on Feb. 23, 1981, he changed this to not responsible by reason of mental disease or defect.

A month later, Sweeney was sent to an institution. He is currently at the maximum security Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center in Orange County, where, one acquaintance says, he still often complains that his thoughts and actions are controlled by electrodes planted by American agents under the direction of Al Lowenstein.



Dennis Sweeney (left) put five bullets in former Rep. Allard Lowenstein (above)

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