

For Ryan, independence meant having to seek his own answers

By KAREN FELD
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WASHINGTON — Saturday, Oct. 15, 1978, was the last night of the 95th session of Congress. For Rep. Leo J. Ryan, D-Calif., it was his last night in Washington before he would head back home and then, several weeks later, embark on his fact-finding trip to Guyana.

I spent much of that final evening here with the congressman, first over a relaxed dinner at Romeo and Juliet, a popular downtown Washington restaurant, and later talking in his office where, between votes on the House floor, we shared a little brandy to celebrate the imminent recess.

IT WAS TO be an all-night session of Congress. Most members were anxious to adjourn and return to their districts for hectic campaigning in the few weeks remaining before the off-year election. Ryan, for his part, was so confident about holding his California congressional seat that his main concern was his post-election journey to a remote part of Guyana, searching out the truth about Jonestown.

It was this same intellectual curiosity and insatiable appetite to experience the unfamiliar — to see reality for himself, however unpleasant the sight might be — that had persuaded Ryan to give up his safe academic career for the hurly-burly of politics; to don clown makeup on one occasion and enter the circus arena as a tramp; to work as a high school teacher in Watts after the riots; to spend eight days behind bars, voluntarily, in Folsom, California's maximum-security prison, and then, last week, to lead an investigative mission to a primitive South American country where a controversial American religious sect, the Peoples Temple, had established a community in exile.

I KNEW RYAN during his six years in Congress as both a friend and a journalist who followed his activities in California as well as in Washington. He had a keen sensi-

tivity to everyone, especially the underprivileged, and sometimes his outspokenness rubbed people the wrong way.

Certainly no one could have talked him out of the trip to Guyana short of predicting the unimaginable — the airport ambush and mass suicides. He wanted to verify personally the "deplorable" conditions at Jonestown, where Jones's cult followers were supposedly being subjected to mental and physical abuse.

The last evening we talked, Ryan drew parallels between his observations during his self-imposed stay in Folsom Prison in 1970 and what he had heard about conditions in Jonestown, where the relatives of many Californians were allegedly being held against their will.

After his stay in Folsom, Ryan wrote a play about his newfound "friends" in that dark, different world, and he gave me a copy of his unproduced script. Ryan titled it *A Small Piece of Sky* — a metaphor for the hope that each prisoner on viewing his life as though seen from the bottom of a deep well.

IN HIS FOREWORD to *A Small Piece of Sky*, Ryan wrote this about Folsom: "I did meet many men who have become members of a subculture that is both distinct and unknown to the rest of America. It is also a violent subculture . . . This play is about those men, and others like them. Society was their victim and so they are now inside the walls. But unless we change that system, we will be their victim again. Where does it end? . . . How shall we end it?"

That's what Leo Ryan was all about: always looking, always questioning, always seeking his own answers. His fierce independence lit his path from California to Washington, as it also lit his mission to Guyana. That light went out only when violence erupted on the edge of the jungle, plunging all of Jonestown into unspeakable darkness.