

WHO I AM

Jim Bertolone

Who I Am

A baby boomer born in 1951 and now a “geezer boomer,” or close to it. We lived with my paternal grandparents in my early years in Rochester, New York. My great-grandparents came here from Sicily when my grandparents were between the ages of 8 and 10 years old, between 1908-1912. Even after we got our own place to live, I spent much time staying at my grandparents’ home. My parents’ generation, which grew up during the Great Depression, worked multiple jobs into the 1960s. My mother also worked, between having four children, just like many growing up today as working poor. In the 1950s, TV shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* were so far removed from our experience, they might as well have been filmed on Mars. My mother was from a family of 15 children; my father, the youngest of four. The Sicilian-American neighborhood we lived in was known as “Mount Allegro,” which would become the title of a book about that neighborhood, written by a neighbor, Jerre Mangione. Mr. Mangione wrote that book as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Federal Writers’ Project, part of the New Deal’s Keynesian efforts to sustain the arts community during the Great Depression. When I was a young man, my father would get me an autographed copy of that book when Jerre Mangione came to visit Rochester. By this time, he was Professor Mangione, of the Universi-

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ty of Pennsylvania. Jerre Mangione's brother lived around the corner and had a small grocery store, and loved jazz. Somehow, Mr. Mangione talked one of the greats on the jazz circuit, one Dizzy Gillespie, to give his son Chuck trumpet lessons. The Mangione boys were seven to nine years older than I was, but Chuck and Gap Mangione would do all right in the music world.

1960-1961 ... The Awakening Begins

My father was a voracious reader, as I was fast becoming with the help of the tax-supported bookmobile. This was kind of a bus library, bringing books to lend to city neighborhoods. In 1963, at the age of 12, I began the habit of reading the morning paper every day, as I had to deliver it to pay a debt from an early brush with the law. Thus, I got the paper at least an hour before everyone else, and enjoyed getting the news and baseball box scores first. However, the awakening to real history and political machinations began at age 9, in 1960, when I watched the Kennedy-Nixon debates with my father. My father was a strong Kennedy supporter, but it probably didn't matter who the Democratic nominee was, because he disliked Nixon with a passion. During the debates, I got filled in on the Hughes Loan, the Checkers speech, Nixon's connections to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Senator McCarthy, red-baiting, and the blacklisting and destruction of one of my father's favorite actors, John Garfield. Needless to say, my father, a union man, did not think too much of the president of the actors' union who was helping to blacklist his own union members. The SAG president was a "B" actor, Ronald Reagan. White reactionary backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement, inner-city riots, and culture shock would lead to Nixon's comeback and the rise of Ronald Reagan. Interestingly, it seemed to me that too many of the conservative "law and order" crowd did not seem to have a problem with terrorism and murder, as long as it was visited on people of color, civil rights advocates, or anti-war demonstrators.

The Move And Civil Rights

In the summer of 1961, my parents bought a house off Lyell Avenue, still a working-class neighborhood with many Italian-Americans, but not exclusively, like the Sicilian-American community of “Mount Allegro.” It was a step up. It would take less than a month and we would be outcasts to most of the neighbors. The school year that began in the fall of 1961 would also be the first year of busing in order to achieve school integration. It was strictly voluntary, and we were not being forced to go to school out of our neighborhood. However, more than 30 African-American kids would be bused to our school. Many of the neighbors were up in arms and organized a boycott; they would keep their kids home from school in protest. I was entering fifth grade, the oldest of four, with my brother Vinnie entering third grade. Much of what I was hearing was uncomfortable, but also above my head. My father sat down with my brother and me, and told us we would go to school. He said that the reason his parents and my mother’s parents came to this country was for a fair shot. He said that it was not about equality; that no two people in the whole world were exactly equal. He said that the promise of this country was equal opportunity and equality of treatment under the law. That if you were honest and willing to work, you had the same opportunity as anyone else to make something of your life. “Those kids have as much right to go to that school as you, and you will go to school.” Not all, but most, kept their kids home from school for nearly two weeks. A few years later, and in retrospect, I would be very proud of my father that day. However, at the time, and already having some issues with both anger and authority, I was more thrilled that I had my father’s permission to defy the other adults in the neighborhood. How cool was that! I went to school those first two weeks, a new school for us, walking the few blocks with a defiant smile all the way. By weeks three and four, the boycott began to fade, though there were a few kids sent to Catholic schools who never came back.

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Race Becomes Personal

When I was in school, high school was eighth grade through twelfth grade. Once puberty came, my olive skin would become very dark in the summer from living on the playground and always playing ball. My curly hair became tight and kinky, like two of my cousins'. My cousin Mike and I were sometimes referred to as "Spook and Spic," and one of the mildest nicknames in high school was "Brillo." Into this mix, the '60s were unfolding, and I was becoming more and more aware of civil rights issues and confrontations and the rejections of establishment thinking. At home, ethnic slurs were not tolerated by my father, and at school, a high school history teacher made me question and think critically. What I was hearing and seeing from too many people on issues of race would cause me some serious issues with authority. I could not respect any adult who used the N word. Though I had always been on the Honor Roll in grammar school, and had made Standard Bearer, supposedly the honor that went to the male with the highest scholastic achievement, high school was different. I got thrown out of school five times, every year from eighth grade to senior year. As luck would have it, I always scored well on Regents finals and did well on the SAT and Regents Scholarship Test. This, along with playing four years of high school football and baseball and voted by peers and coaches as an All City/All Scholastic outfielder, my senior year seemed to cancel out my discipline issues, as I applied to five colleges and was accepted by all of them, Notre Dame included. Economics would dictate a state college, where, with a partial Regents scholarship, I could work my way through with \$200-a-semester tuition. The propaganda of the free market apologists has denied such a similar opportunity to today's young people.

My Father as Dr. Frankenstein

When I left home to go to State college in 1969, there were three younger siblings at home.

My freshman year in college, 1969-1970, I think my father began to worry that teaching me to stand up for what I believed in

was going to cause me a hard life, including the possibility of jail. There were civil rights and anti-war picket lines, and a takeover of a college building and student strike after Kent State and Jackson State in May of 1970. Having African-American friends brought, along with my own natural Afro, more police stops and police scrutiny. The divisions of the '60s have been covered *ad nauseam*, WWII generation versus anti-Vietnam, white versus black, integration versus bootstraps, and “a man’s home is his castle,” second-class status versus women’s rights, etc. My father, a World War II veteran, knew guys whom I knew, and their families, where Vietnam hit close to home, sometimes painfully so. He educated himself on Vietnam and other issues. I had a student deferment entering state college in September 1969, for about 30 days. Nixon classified us all 1-A for the first draft lottery in December 1969. This would turn out to be a lottery that I would win, with number 275. These and other dynamics had my father, unlike many of his peers, moving more to the left, not the right.

Nixon And The Strike

Our old nemesis, Nixon, was back, and was now the president. I think many moderates and liberals were aghast at the anti-war movement in the mid-to-late 1960s, because they voted for President Johnson and felt he was sincere. This was the man who passed Kennedy’s Civil Rights Act, said “We shall overcome” on TV to pass the Voting Rights Act, stood up to the Klan, and tried to conquer poverty. However, after Nixon got elected, many of these people already knew Nixon as mean-spirited, manipulative, and untrustworthy, and older generations began to question the reasons we were in Vietnam. Economic issues, always there, got tougher for a lot of people, and particularly for postal workers, like my father and his brothers. Nixon’s promises to postal workers were worthless. Underpaid for years, a promised raise was undercut, and real injustice was felt by postal workers.

Uncle Sam v. Postal Workers

My father and three uncles were in the Postal Unions.

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On St. Patrick's Day in 1970, postal workers had had enough, and wildcat strikes began in New York City, and spread. Before the computer age, stocks, payrolls, bank transactions, trade at New York City ports, and most all business was done through the mail. Commerce and profits took a large hit. Nixon called out the Army and National Guard. They could not deliver the mail and, unlike Kent State and Jackson State less than two months later, there were no bullets or violence visited on the strikers. Top pay for a postal clerk or letter carrier in 1970 was about \$8,400 per year after 21 years of service, about 25% below the poverty-level threshold for a family of four in New York State. About 20% of postal workers in New York City were eligible for food stamps. In 1969, my freshman year in college, I qualified for a National Defense Student Loan, and you had to be under the poverty level to qualify. Needless to say, winning that illegal strike and gaining the right to collectively bargain on wages and benefits would bring postal workers solidly into the middle class.

When I left home to go to state college in 1969, there were three younger siblings at home. Because we were under the poverty-level, there was no money for school. At that time, environmental issues came to the fore: Love Canal, an occasional river catching on fire, and the closing of Lake Ontario, as well as some of the other Great Lakes, to swimmers. The fish were not edible and swimmers were becoming ill from the pollution. I got a seasonal job digging holes for and constructing all types of swimming pools, from concrete in the ground to redwood and other above-ground pools. For the next four summers, we could barely keep up with the demand, and I made good money for those days.

As 1973 approached, I had the maximum hours allowed, at that time, in my History major and a Political Science minor, and had completed the Liberal Arts core, and was being scheduled to student teach. I decided that teaching was not my calling, and I got tired of being broke, so I left school.

Not long after I left college, the 1973 recession hit, driven by OPEC, where gas doubled from about 36 cents a gallon to over 70 cents. Rochester's Big Three, Kodak, Bausch & Lomb, and Xerox,

were not hiring, and the two large auto plants were laying off. Jobs were tough.

I would spend six months grinding steel as a tool & die apprentice, with a base six-day, 49-hour schedule.

I had taken some Civil Service tests, and when the Postal Service called in September 1973, I decided to try that. Of course, with my family's general union background and, specifically, postal unions (father and three uncles), I joined the American Postal Workers Union the same day. My first "legal" job, with work papers, at age 16 in 1967-68, was also a union job, in a large grocery chain represented at that time by the Retail Clerks International Union.

It has often been said that bad bosses are often union's best organizers, and the Postal Service was no different. New employees, especially "Subs," were talked down to and treated poorly, and I was not having any of it. I went to union meetings from the start, served on an Election Committee, and was a union steward for the afternoon shift by 1974. All positions were elected, and in 1978, I became the Clerk Craft Director, the largest of the four crafts that made up my union. By 1983, I was a full-time advocate and had completed the Labor Studies program at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations, and spent many years on their State Board. By 1990, I was the president of my Local. My predecessor, Larry Tuchrello, mentored me and believed in me. So did National President Moe Biller, out of New York City's Lower East Side and the leader in 1970, along with Vince Sombrotto of the Letter Carriers, of the wildcat strike that gave postal workers collective bargaining and NLRB rights.

Moe Biller would appoint me to the first group of National Arbitration Advocates in the early 1980s, and I was assigned cases in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and at headquarters in Washington, D.C. Moe was a friend who trusted me because I never asked him for anything, and had turned down National Union positions elected and appointed, including in the top half-dozen spots as, by this time, I would not relocate to Washington, D.C., NYC, or Philly.

In addition to family and some mentors who believed in me, it

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was always the union members. First the WWII generation, like my father, who believed in me and said “you’re our guy and the future.” The Postal Service is the largest civilian employer of veterans due to veteran preference in hiring. I was honored to be their advocate as Korea’s vets and Vietnam vets were also entering the Postal Service. We are also the largest civilian employer of African-Americans, minorities, and women. I remain honored to represent those historically denied a fair shake.

AFL-CIO

I was recruited to the executive board of my CLC by Chris Garlock, who would leave in a couple of years to produce Jim Hightower’s radio show in Austin, Texas. He is now the lead staff in Washington, D.C.’s, Labor Federation. We moved the CLC to put the leaders of two dozen unions on the executive board in order to build power. I was asked to deliver the keynote speech at Workers’ Memorial Day in 1995, after the Oklahoma domestic terrorist bombing that killed so many, including children in daycare. It was possibly my most passionate and angry speech, and attacked our own fascists, from the KKK, Nazi Skinheads, and G. Gordon Liddy, who had advocated shooting at federal employees’ heads because they wear bulletproof vests. The speech must have moved a few as, even though it was only a few minutes long, it appeared word-for-word on TV and in the newspaper. By the end of 1997, I was the consensus new president of the CLC.

In 2001, Moe Biller appointed me as his designee for the New Alliance, which would result in Area Labor Federation. I have gotten to know and work with so many great people from labor, WDI, and non-profits, and have met with Congress and senators, and Cesar Chavez, Jesse Jackson, Bill Lucy, and others from CBTU.

Civil Rights, Labor Rights, And Conservatives

When I was 17, like many, I had an epiphany when Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered while standing with black sanitation workers in Memphis. Workers demanding the right to unionize

and bargain for living wages and safe working conditions. Meeting Cesar Chavez and supporting the rights of farm workers led many of us to believe that civil rights and workers' rights were part of the same struggle, the struggle for human rights. My studies as a History major, and life experience, would lead me to the conclusion that one cannot be conservative in our society and be a union advocate. It is a contradiction. Conservatives opposed every bit of progress toward equal rights and justice for all. Conservatives opposed American independence and supported the English Crown, the Tories. The Conservative Right opposed all progress toward justice in our history. They supported slavery and child labor. They were against equal rights and integration. They stood against equal rights for women, the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act. They stood against workers' rights, collective bargaining, a minimum wage, the eight-hour workday, public education, Medicare, and Social Security.

Most of these things were the platform of Democratic Socialists, like Norman Thomas and, later, Martin Luther King, Jr. both strong anti-communists, a distinction lost on most Americans. Progressives on the left would move these items forward, and many would begin to become law during the New Deal and/or the 1960s. With the rise of Milton Friedman, and the free market the answer to all problems, leading to Reagan, the pendulum has swung to the right. Equal rights, economic justice, and political justice have regressed. As unions have been targeted and weakened, we now have 42% of Americans working for less than \$15 per hour, and wealth inequality has returned to the days of the Robber Barons and the Gilded Age. The English writer and philosopher, John Stewart Mill said, before the middle of the 19th century after touring America, that "not all conservatives are stupid, but all stupid people are conservatives." The only reason to form a democracy is so that the people can protect themselves from the rich and powerful. The problem with believing in small, limited central government is that power abhors a vacuum. What we see today are the rich and powerful, individuals, corporations, and banksters filling that power vacuum at the expense of a people's democracy.

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If you tell me you are conservative but a union advocate, you are telling me you are confused and/or ignorant.

We must strive to be open-minded, while thinking critically; strive to know history; and always follow the money. We can move the arc back toward justice, and we must.

As for my own life, I've had a rich and satisfying union career. I ran for office in my own Local for 42 years. I had opposition once, and 80% of my members cast a secret ballot to elect me by 7 to 1. Since 1998, I have been president of the CLC, and since 2002, of the Area Labor Federation, unopposed each time. I am grateful to all these workers who have supported me, and I owe a debt I cannot repay. I was allowed to do what I am most passionate about, do what I most believe in for my life's work, and make a living at it. I thank and owe them all.