

My Friend Phil

My friend Phil turned 84 July 30, 2011, and I want to tell his story—at least as much as I know. Phil has been reticent about sharing many of the details, and I have been reticent about prying. I am afraid that if I don't get what little I know down on paper, it will not be told.

Phil Bernstein is six months older than me. He grew up on Fox Street, but I didn't get to know him until we were in junior high school. When Phil was 10, his father committed suicide. He jumped out of the window into the courtyard of 725 Fox Street. Soon after, Phil's family—his mother, and an older brother and sister—moved around the corner to Southern Boulevard. Actually, his brother Moe, who was 18, simply left the family. His sister Lillian, who was 12 years older than Phil, was married to a man whose name was also Moe (Senate). For several years after his father's death, Phil was shuttled from one relative to the next in the Bronx. No one was supposed to know this, and Phil would take the trolley to school. When he entered junior high, he was finally living at home. He also was the only one of us who had a paying job. He worked in the morning for a bakery (Mr. Gamzen?), before going to school.

In junior high, Phil and Mel Schulman became close friends. They were both interested in chemistry, and came under the influence of our science teacher, Mr. Mandel. I assume they stayed after school and conducted experiments, or whatever students interested in chemistry do. Mel knew how difficult things were for Phil, and when Mel was offered a job in a neighborhood drug store, he turned it down and told Phil about it.

Life was difficult for Phil. The family lived in a four room apartment in a sixth floor walk-up. Phil slept on a couch in the living room. His mother was a cook, and managed to get a job in a luncheonette in downtown Manhattan. In the summers, she worked in a small hotel in the Catskills (the Prospect Hotel?), and Phil accompanied her. When my son David had his Bar Mitzvah, Phil revealed that he never had a real Bar Mitzvah. He was taken to a Synagogue in the area, was given an Aliyah, said the blessing, and that was it.

As a teenager, spending his summers in the Catskills, Phil, met a young woman who knew jazz, and who shared this knowledge with him. I recently asked Phil about her. He said her name was Muriel Finkelstein and she was in college. When he returned to the city, Phil began to collect jazz records, and he shared his knowledge about jazz with his friends. He also shared his records which he started buying with his friends, because he didn't own a record player. When he dropped in to visit friends, he would listen to his records.

Everybody in our junior high school class liked Phil. He was bright, but we all were bright. More important, he seemed laid back, self-effacing. We elected him class captain. I don't believe he sought it; it was generally recognized that he would make a good class leader. I can still see him as he ambled down the auditorium aisle to receive an award for our class's performance—best attendance, fewest students late: Phil was cool..

Guys liked him and girls liked him. In elementary school, he was in the same class as my ex-wife's sister, Hilda, which is how he got to know Sylvia. He was both Hilda's and Sylvia's friend. I certainly had no girl friends in junior high school. We were sophomores in college when Phil introduced me to Sylvia. As I have noted elsewhere, I liked her immediately, but I

wouldn't think of asking her out "because she was Phil's friend." It was only after Phil married that I figured it was all right to ask Sylvia for a date.

Phil developed an interest in art equal to his interest in jazz. He collected art books, read extensively, and visited art museums and galleries. It was Phil who introduced us to the Museum of Non-Objective Art (later the Guggenheim) and told us about the 57th Street galleries. I wouldn't have set foot in the galleries at the time if it wasn't for Phil. They sold art to rich people, and seemed unapproachable. On one occasion, when we were in college and "doing" the galleries, we visited one with several Maurice Utrillos. Phil explained to us how he painted the streets of Paris, and added that he died in poverty. The gallery receptionist smiled and said, "Oh no monsieur, he is very much alive." Phil smiled and shrugged. Where lots of people whiz through museums, Phil was known to stand in front of one painting for five minutes or more.

All of us moved on from JHS 52 to Stuyvesant High School. (Except Sol who went to Clinton.) Phil continued his interest in chemistry, but an English teacher was his favorite. He also continued his interest in jazz and art. In the spring of 1945, we were bombarded by armed forces recruiters, and Phil succumbed and enlisted in the Navy. With exquisite timing, he was inducted on VJ Day, the day the Japanese surrendered. I don't know what his assignment was, but I know he was on a ship that went to China, and that in an absent-minded moment, he carved his initials on the Captain's table and was in the brig for a brief time on bread and water.

Phil returned, and joined us at CCNY. Our Reading Out Loud group was in full swing. (Phil's specialty was the kazoo.) It was a few weeks before New Year's Eve of 1950. Our friend Bob was going out with a young woman he met at camp, who had a younger sister. He called me to ask if I would like to go out with her. I already had a date. He called Phil who didn't have a date, so Bob "fixed him up" with Martha. They fell in love, and were married a little more than a year later. Phil and Martha went to Texas where he planned to do graduate work, but then they decided to go to Boston so Martha could complete her studies at Radcliffe. Phil switched to Brandeis to complete his Master's. While in the Boston area, Phil and Martha worked as house parents for a Jewish agency, and Phil worked at the Beth Israel Hospital and then later as a chemist for the Borden Company in Leominster.

Like all of us, Phil was a first generation American. Our parents were European born and spoke Yiddish (except for the Hungarians.) Therefore we were all familiar with Yiddish, and Phil knew lots of Yiddish jokes. Several of us called him by his Yiddish name, Fayvel. Martha and her sister Edna were also referred to by their Yiddish names—Malke and Eekie--by family and close friends.

The '50s and '60s saw our ROL group spreading out: Arizona, Florida, New Jersey, Washington and even Long Island. Coincidentally, both Phil and Mel went to work for Thiokol in New Jersey, and Phil and Martha settled in Yardley Pennsylvania. Barbara and Sidney remained in the Bronx.

During this period, we all started having children. The Bernstein brood began with Benjamin, then Jason, Louis and Emily. Phil was a loving father. He lavished attention on all his children, but none more than Jason. When Jason was about two, it became clear that he was brain-damaged. This started a series of visits to doctors, special schools and finally group houses, a job, an accident, and a tragic death.

Phil was devoted to his entire family: his mother, his sister Lily and her husband and their children, Barry and Faith (known as Butchy and Faigie). His brother took off, but Phil maintained contact with his brother's children. Faigie had a learning disability, and in 1956, when I was working for the ILGWU's shipping clerk's union, Phil asked me if I could help her. I was able to get her a job in a clothing warehouse as a ticketer, but the job was too demanding for her.

Phil suffered many losses, but the loss of Jason hit him hardest. He started going to Shul to say Kaddish. He found it comforting, and then started studying with the Rabbi. Involved as he was with the Shul, Phil decided to have the Bar Mitzvah he never had. He learned his Haftorah, chanted it beautifully, davened, gave a short talk, and after services, family and friends had a festive meal in the Shul's Social Hall, where Phil was showered with gifts.

Speaking of gifts, no one is more generous than Phil. On two occasions, when we got together for a Reading Out Loud, Phil brought gifts for everyone: a CCNY sweatshirt, and a book that he thought we would all enjoy.

I don't have Phil's resume, but I know he was a respected organic chemist and had more than 20 patents to his credit. Two jobs that I remember: at an electric storage battery company and a nickel company. Phil taught as well. He was a natural as a teacher. During one of our ROLs, he lectured about Ethanol. Early on he taught his friends about jazz, and his favorite tenor sax players: Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins. Also, about art, especially Renaissance art. Phil and Martha loved Italy. Phil worked with an Italian chemist and they became good friends. He invited them to visit; Martha learned Italian; they then rented a house in a small village and returned for several years.

The Bernstein children grew up, moved away and married. Phil and Martha retired and moved from Glen Ridge back to Yardley. It was getting harder for Martha to negotiate the stairs, and they decided to move into an independent living facility. Martha's sister and her husband had found Heritage Towers in Doylestown, PA, and Phil and Martha decided to follow them.

They were happy initially, in their two bedroom apartment, though it was hard to downsize. They had so many lovely pieces. Phil had a lot of woodworking equipment in his basement in Glen Ridge. He persuaded the officials at Heritage Towers to accept it with the idea of creating a woodworking facility. It never happened. He also gave them one of his Isamu Naguchi-like benches. Phil also initiated a short-story reading group.

Martha's condition deteriorated and she was moved into the nursing section. Heritage Towers moved Phil into a studio apartment. Not too long after, Heritage Towers moved Phil into the nursing section, so that they now live in what is essentially a hospital room. Phil and Martha always loved good food. Both are excellent cooks. They are now eating less than appetizing institutional food.

Memorial Day weekend 2008, ROL had a three-generation reunion at the Pocono Environmental and Education Center. We had more than 50 participants from the seven families. We designed a T shirt and every family had a different color. We very much wanted Phil and Martha and all their children and grandchildren there. On Saturday afternoon, Phil arrived with daughter Emily,

her husband David, and their daughter Joanna. Phil had difficulty walking. This was an ROL, and Phil had a short story to read. While he was reading, his son-in-law David strolled up to me and said, "Your friend has dementia." Emily and Joanna were having a wonderful time when, after a few hours, David announced that it was time to go home. We suggested that Phil stay over and one of us would take him back to Doylestown. David refused and they left. We have had two ROLs at Heritage Towers since, so that we could involve Phil and Martha.

Both Phil and Martha get around now in wheel chairs. Phil no longer reads short stories to residents. He is not doing much reading at all. He isn't listening to music. The TV seems to be on all the time. They have given up their computer. It is almost impossible to reach them by phone. They have few visitors.

Some time in the late spring of 2011, when I called Phil and got through, he told me that he had gone back to the Bronx, and looked in on his old apartment at 725 Fox Street. I was amazed. How did he get there? With his son, Louis, he told me. I called Louis a few weeks later and asked about the trip to the Bronx. Louis said that there was no trip to the Bronx. In addition to short term memory loss, Phil is suffering from a number of physical ailments, most recently diabetes. Martha no longer makes jokes. It has become a sad and lonely life.

October, 2011