

BARNEY AND ME

Over the almost 36 years since I first met him, there were times that I wondered if Barney Frank really knew who I was. I would see him at a function, and despite my efforts to approach him, he managed to evade me. I knew his time was limited, there were people more important than me whom he had to acknowledge, and he did not enjoy milling around and making small talk. Still...

I first met Barney within a few months after I came to Boston, in the fall of 1979. It was at a meeting of the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). I was there as the director of the New England region of the US Commission on Civil Rights, and former chair of the Social Action Committee of the Washington DC JCRC. He was there as a member of the State House of Representatives. We said hello. I was immediately impressed by his comments. I don't know if I said anything to impress him. For the next several months, if we were at the same meetings, we nodded to each other.

Then, in the spring of 1980, our mutual friend, Congressman Father Robert Drinan, (he had chaired the Commission's Massachusetts Advisory Committee) was told by the Vatican that he could not be both a priest and hold public office, so he was forced to leave Congress. Barney decided to go after the Democratic nomination. I sent a small check to his campaign office. A few weeks later, I was going to a meeting at the ILGWU just as Barney was coming out. I nodded, and as he hurried by, said, "Hi Jake. Thanks for the check." I was stunned. I didn't believe he remembered my name. Not only did he remember my name; he was aware that I made a contribution.

Over the years, I learned that he was born in New Jersey, went to Harvard, (and Harvard Law at night) and worked as an assistant to Boston Mayor Kevin White, and to Congressman Michael Harrington, before becoming a state representative. He won the Democratic primary in 1980 (to which I had contributed), and the general election. In 1982, his seat was redistricted, and he had to run against the Republican incumbent, a popular Margaret Heckler. The district now included Fall River and New Bedford, as well as Newton and Brookline. Barney won, and kept winning for the next 15 terms. During the early 80s, there was talk that Barney was gay. OK. So he's gay. He was certainly acknowledged to be a very effective legislator, smart, funny, and he took good care of his constituents. In 1987, Barney "came out."

In 1995, I was chair of the Boston Workmen's Circle, and we were planning a 95th Anniversary Conference. I suggested we honor Barney Frank. We extended the invitation, and he accepted. We presented him with a plaque, and he made a great speech, complimenting the "Arbeiter Ring" (the old pronunciation) on its accomplishments, noting that his father had been a member in Bayonne.

When David was in high school, he worked as an intern in Barney's Newton office for two summers, and during the summer of 2001, after his first year of college, he worked in his Washington office. This was the beginning of the shift from David being known as my son, to me being known as David's father.

After I retired in 1997, I continued to be involved in the same causes, and continued to see Barney at the same meetings, and demonstrations. Sometimes, when I caught his eye, he would acknowledge my presence. On one occasion, he spoke to a gathering of Workmen's Circle shule parents, and after his talk, I was able to schmooze with him, and even had a picture taken with him. At the 2013 Keshet Cabaret, Barney was being honored. Also being honored was our friend Jayne Guberman, as part of Keshet's Parent and Family Connection. Keshet (which means rainbow in Hebrew) is an organization working for inclusion of LGBT in Jewish life. I never saw Barney happier. He was wearing a tuxedo, and was with his husband Jim Ready, whom he married the year before. Barney strolled around during the festivities and greeted everyone warmly, including me.

The following year, 2014, the Boston Democratic Socialists of America came up with the idea to honor me. When I was asked who I would like to have introduce me, and present the award, I said Barney Frank. Why not? All he could do was say no. I tracked him down in Maine. I called and left a message. Barney got back to me the next day. It was mid-April and the event was scheduled for June 8. Would he? He explained that he did not have his calendar in front of him, but if he could, he would. It turned out that he had two previous commitments for that date. Barney sounded genuinely disappointed. He agreed to serve as an honorary chair and to send a message to the event. I proudly present an excerpt of Barney's message:

“When I received a call asking me if I would attend and present the award to Jake, I was very happy to say yes. He has been a strong, unwavering supporter of the fight for social justice for as long as I can remember. I was very happy to learn that his great service was being recognized. Unfortunately, I received the call when I was out of town and away from my office, and was unaware that on this date, I had already been locked into two other commitments...I am deeply regretful. I am one of many who have been the beneficiary of Jake's selfless, valuable support. The list of people and causes on whose behalf he has worked so effectively is a very long one. He has been a “shtarke” for all of the important values to which public policy should be dedicated...I express my thanks to the sponsors (DSA) for paying this very well deserved tribute to a pillar of the fight for a better America.”

Thank you, Barney. You really do know who I am. When the time comes, I may have someone read an excerpt from the excerpt, as part of my eulogy.

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