

Lining Up Harry Van Arsdale

I recently wrote a piece about Walter Kirschenbaum. It ended with my description of how Walter said he would call FDR Jr, the Chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, to help me get a job, and how, as a result of his call, I was contacted for an interview. But what happened before and after that?

Before: When it was clear that my job at AFSCME was ending, I saw it as an opportunity to make the switch to Federal employment, and the most logical Federal employer for me was the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. I had a friend who was a Commissioner, Aileen Hernandez. And I had another friend who was on the staff as liaison between the AFL-CIO and EEOC, Walter Davis. And I had six years experience doing just the kind of work EEOC was supposed to do. So I called Aileen, we had lunch, and she told me she could do nothing. So I called Walter and he told me to submit my application, but he didn't think he could be much help. I submitted my application, and waited.

After: After my chance meeting with Walter Kirschenbaum, which resulted in his calling Chairman FDR Jr., it was Walter Davis who called me at the Chairman's request. He asked me to come in for a meeting. It was clear that Walter Kirschenbaum's phone call got the ball rolling. I'm in! However, when I met with Walter Davis, he didn't ask me about my experience. He knew all about it. He didn't ask me what kind of job I want at EEOC. Instead, he asked me how well I knew Harry Van Arsdale, the President of the New York City AFL-CIO.

I was surprised by the question, but I shouldn't have been. I was aware that most jobs are gotten by "*who* you know" not "*what* you know." That is why I had called Aileen. In fact, it was because I knew Jerry Wurf that I got the job at AFSCME. (And it was because I knew Walter Kirschenbaum and Walter knew FDR Jr., that I was having this meeting.) I told Walter that I knew Harry, and Harry knew me, but as the person who staffed the New York City AFL-CIO Civil Rights Committee, I was a thorn in his side, a pain in his butt. "Well," Walter said, "if you want a job at EEOC, it would be helpful if you get a recommendation from Harry."

Since I wanted a job at EEOC, I got to work immediately. I knew both the NYC AFL-CIO Secretary, Moe Iushevitz, and Treasurer, Bill Bowe. I also knew several members of the NYC AFL-CIO Executive Committee. I called them, I wrote to them, and even made a trip to New York and met with a few of them. I explained that I had applied for a position with EEOC, and was told I needed a recommendation from Harry. Would they please ask Harry to give me a recommendation? Of course. That is not so much to ask. Sounded to me that it was in the bag.

I waited a few weeks, and made some follow-up calls. Did they speak to Harry? Yes, they did. What did he say? He didn't say anything. Will he give me a recommendation? They didn't know. It sounded strange. I called Walter Davis and asked about my status. He said he didn't know. I called Personnel at EEOC and asked about my application. They had no information. Strange.

Having learned not to put all my eggs in one basket, I had made application to several other Federal agencies, including the US Commission on Civil Rights. In a conversation with my friend Ruth Stack, I mentioned that there seems to be a hold-up at EEOC, and I had applied for a

position with the Civil Rights Commission. “Oh,” she said. “I know Sam Simmons who heads their Field Operation. I’ll speak to Sam.” “Thank you.” I replied.

Within a week, I received a call from Sam Simmons. I met with him. He looked over my resume. We had a long talk about my work experience. He told me he had an opening, he was interested in me, and would talk to Staff Director Bill Taylor. I met with Bill Taylor. My application was processed, I was offered the job in September 1965, and I accepted.

Several months later, I heard a rumor that Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr. was planning to leave EEOC and run for Governor of New York State. When you run for the Democratic nomination for Governor, it helps if you have lots of endorsements. One of the most valuable is the endorsement of the President of the NYC AFL-CIO. Aha! Now I know why Harry would not give me a recommendation. FDR Jr. would use it as an argument to get Harry’s endorsement. I gave your boy a job. It’s payback time. I would have been a pawn in FDR Jr.’s ambitions. If that isn’t ridiculous! In May 1966, FDR Jr. left EEOC and announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination.

In September 1966, the Democrats nominated NYC Council President Frank O’Connor to run against the incumbent, Nelson Rockefeller. I think I know who Harry endorsed. Poor FDR Jr. did not get the Democratic party’s nomination. He did get the Liberal Party’s nomination, and I am sure he had Walter Kirschenbaum’s wholehearted support. In November, Rockefeller was reelected with over 2,690,000 votes. O’Connor got 2,298,000 votes, and FDR Jr. ended up with 507,000 votes.

I ended up on the staff of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, for which I did not need Harry Van Arsdale’s endorsement. If FDR Jr. had gotten Harry’s endorsement, and gotten the Democratic nomination, he would have won the election. And I might have ended up with the EEOC.

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