

THE STORY OF MY AWARD

It was a quiet evening toward the end of March, 2014. I received a call from Mike Pattberg, the president of Boston Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). I was surprised to hear from him. My involvement with DSA these days consists of my paying my dues, and sadly observing how few members we have.

“Hi, Mike. What can I do for you?” He said that Boston DSA would like to honor me with the “Debs-Thomas-Bernstein Award” at their Annual Awards Event in June. I laughed, and said they must be scraping the bottom of the barrel. Not at all, Mike responded. They had been thinking about me as a recipient for some time. He told me there would be two awardees this year, and the second awardee would be Cecily McMillan, a 23 year old activist in Occupy Wall Street, who had been arrested. He forwarded to me a piece about Cecily, which had been written by Maurice Isserman.

Mike explained they liked the idea of youth and age. I said, if I accept, I suspect I will be getting the award as much for longevity as for activity. I told him I would think about it, talk to Fran, and would call him the next day. Fran thought it was great. I called Mike, said yes, and he asked me for a brief biography.

I had been writing my memoirs for the past 15 years, so it was not a problem for me to whip something out. When he received it, he e-mailed me back, “Wow!” A nice response. I am aware that I have had a busy life, and came up with two observations: “I have done well by doing good,” and “Am I now considered an elder statesman, or a has-been.” Having worked non-stop from 1942 to 1997, and having been involved in all kinds of good causes, it might be fun to have that recognized.

Mike and I discussed the details. They would give me the Debs-Thomas-Bernstein Award. (They also have a Randolph-Harrington Award.) He will make a pitch for DSA. After all, it is a fund-raiser. Then someone of my choice will introduce me and give me the award, and I will make a speech. I thought for a moment, and concluded the most impressive introducer I can think of is Barney Frank. I asked Mike if I can have two introducers. He said, sure. I felt my son David would be perfect. The date chosen was Sunday afternoon, June 8. The place I recommended was the Workmen’s Circle, and the WC generously said yes.

Having the date and place, I called Barney. He does what so many are now doing: Not answering. I left a message, explaining why I called. He called back the next day. The first time I met Barney was at the JCRC soon after I came to Boston in 1979. I was the new Regional Director of the US Civil Rights Commission. He was a State Representative. The following year, he decided to run for the Congressional seat being vacated by Father Robert Drinan. I sent him a small contribution. Passing him a few weeks later, at the ILGWU office, he nodded and said, "Thanks Jake, for the check." I was surprised that he remembered my name.

Over the years I saw him at scores of meetings. I extended the invitation to him to address the 95th Anniversary celebration of the Workmen's Circle, and he accepted. David worked for him at both his Newton and Washington offices. On the strength of this relationship, I asked, and he said yes, but explained that he did not have his calendar in front of him. He also liked the venue, explaining that his father was a member of the "Arbeiter Ring." The following week, he called me very apologetically, saying he could not do it because he had two long-term commitments that day. I said I understood, and subsequently asked if he could send a message to be read at the event, and be listed as an honorary chair. He said yes to both. Next came identifying other honorary chairs. I asked several "titled" friends—president, director, chair, and they all agreed.

I told David about the award, and he was very excited, and said he would be honored to introduce me: A reunion of Barney and David. After I learned that Barney couldn't make it, I learned that David couldn't make it either, because his summer employment at the Yiddish Book Center started June 6. I turned to Workmen's Circle former president Mike Felsen, and my daughter Carol. (Both came through big time.)

Mike Pattberg asked me to send him a few photos for the flyer, which I did. He chose the picture of me with Elizabeth Warren at the Succah the JLC and JALSA erected at Occupy Boston, but he cut out Sen. Warren. The flyer featured the photos of Cecily and me, and our biographies, as well as the time and place of the event. DSA distributed the flyers by e-mail and regular mail; I distributed the flyers at meetings I attended, and by e-mail, a new skill I learned.

I started thinking about what I wanted to say. I listed issues that I am concerned about. I listed issues that the Socialist movement has been concerned about over the years. I looked through Mike Harrington's books, I looked through biographies of Debs and Thomas, and reviewed what I knew about Julie Bernstein. I jotted down ideas, and came up with a great many clever phrases like, "comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable," and a quote from Henry Frick: "I can always hire half the working class to kill the other half." And a description of corporate boards as, "male, stale and pale." And Harrington's, "left wing of the possible." I compiled statistics about increasing income inequality, and the increasing power of the corporations, about the weakened labor movement, and voter intimidation. I thought about women's rights, gay rights, the environment, health care, gun control; exploitation of factory workers, agricultural workers, domestic workers; war, brutality, violence. And then decided that is not what I will talk about. It would be, to use another cliché, "preaching to the choir."

I would thank DSA, thank my introducers, thank those who came, thank my co-honoree, and describe my connection with the three Socialist leaders whose names are on the award: my mother's link to Debs and Thomas, and my link to Julie Bernstein. And that is what I did.

As June 8 drew near, I asked DSA about the response. Not much. A couple of my friends sent contributions, and I began receiving calls and e-mails, congratulating me, and then explaining that they won't be able to make it. On June 7, I received a copy of Boston DSA's "Yankee Radical" by e-mail, headed "All Out for Jake and Cecily!" but it was too late for anyone to receive it. Yet, better late than never.

June 8 was a beautiful day, sunny and warm. Unfortunately, the Workmen's Circle does not have air conditioning. Carol was taking a bus up from New York, and then the T to the event. I assured several friends that there was plenty of parking around the building. The "social" was to begin at 3 pm, and the "program" at 4 pm. I arrived there at 2:30 pm. The only one there was Mike Katz who was the designated WC welcomer. Where were the DSA people, the refreshments, the leaflets, the contribution-taker? Thankfully, they came about 2:50 pm, as Mike K and I were setting up the chairs.

It occurred to me that there are parallels between this event and a Bar Mitzvah, and a funeral. With regard to the former, the gift goes to the organization, not the honoree. But speeches are expected from both. No speech is expected from the latter, but speeches (called eulogies) are expected, either from a designated speechmaker, or friends and/or family, describing the late honoree.

It also occurred to me that neither the award, a Bar Mitzvah nor a funeral could be considered a success without a lot of people. Friends and family have to come through. I low-keyed the DSA award, and did not want my old friends to shlep up to Boston. I was touched that they made contributions in my honor. But I hoped that local friends would attend, and thankfully they did. There were close personal friends, friends from the WC and the WC Book Group, the Senior Center's writing group and discussion group, the Jewish community, including Schechter, the Newton Center Minyan, the JLC and JALSA. And friends who are also DSAers. By 3:45, the room was filled, and I could not have been happier.

Most organizations running fundraisers usually pick honorees who have a following, who have business or organizational connections where there is money, and where there would be a payoff to be seen, or listed. This obviously was not my case. However, there were more than enough people to consider it a success.

When I worked for a union, we received scores of requests from charitable, political, and social justice organizations. Unions had money earmarked for such contributions. The Executive Board would approve the contribution, which usually consisted of buying a table to a fundraising dinner. Attendees were jokingly designated "the eating team." There were first, second and third eating teams. Usually, the first eating team consisted of the manager and staff. The second eating team was made up of Executive Board members, and the third eating team were the elected shop chairs. Those were the days: Fancy hotel dining rooms, prime rib, endless speeches.

There was no one in the WC hall that day who had his or her way paid for. Everyone made a contribution to DSA on my behalf. They were my friends honoring me. I was thrilled and humbled. Sadly, my co-honoree was in jail, and being from New York, there was no one who turned out for her. She was represented by Lucy Parks, a young woman heading her defense committee.

The program got under way. Julie Johnson, the moderator, introduced Mike Katz who welcomed everyone to Workmen's Circle, and said nice things about me. Lucy was introduced and she spoke passionately about Cecily's arrest, trial and 90 day sentence. The hat was passed, and more than \$500 was collected.

Messages from Senator Bernie Sanders was read, and then from Barney Frank, and Rep. Ruth Balser congratulating me and expressing regret at not being here. This was followed by two wonderful introductions—from my daughter Carol and from Mike Felsen, both saying nice things about me. They then presented me with the Debs-Thomas-Bernstein Award: "To Jacob Schlitt for his lifetime of work in the struggle for social justice." When I arose to accept it, I received a standing ovation—my first.

I have already shared the text of my remarks. I made some changes, felt I was going on too long, found myself getting emotional talking about my mother and my friend Julie Bernstein, and for someone who cannot carry a tune, I was pleased with the response to my two union musical selections: "The Cloakmakers Union," and "Talking Union."

Looking out at the crowd, I saw people I loved, and I felt a deep gratitude to DSA for making this happen. I have no idea if DSA raised what they hoped they would. All I know is that I had a ball.

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