

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN MAKING APPOINTMENTS

Reading the NY Times November 25th I came upon Clyde Haberman's "NYC" column. It's head: "Naming a Senator Who Can Follow Clinton's Tough Act." And its subhead: "A black Catholic lesbian would do nicely, especially one from upstate." Haberman wanted Governor Paterson "... to find a gay, black, Roman Catholic woman with a Latino surname..." My God, he was describing Aileen Hernandez!

I was transported back to Washington DC in the summer of 1965 and my lunch meeting with Aileen at the Mayflower Hotel. At the time, I was the Assistant Director of Education and Research for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and had begun to look for another job. Being in Washington, the logical place to look was the Federal government. And for me, the most logical Federal agency was the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. And who had just been named a Commissioner by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., who had been named Chairman by Lyndon B. Johnson? My old friend from the ILGWU Training Institute, Aileen Clarke Hernandez.

Aileen and I were members of the first Institute class that ran from May 1950 through April 1951. When we were given our assignments after "graduation," Aileen went to Los Angeles where she worked as an organizer, and then the Education and Public Relations Director. I stayed in New York and worked as an organizer for Local 38, Custom Tailors and Alteration Workers. Eventually, we both left the ILGWU. I went to work for the Jewish Labor Committee, and Aileen went on to be the Deputy Chief of the California Division of Fair Employment Practices. And where I had married Sylvia in December 1951, Aileen married a garment cutter named Alfonso Hernandez in 1952, and divorced in 1961.

Now 14 years after the Training Institute, we were both in Washington. As is true of most luncheon meetings in Washington, the invitee is asking the invitor for a favor. I had done the inviting, and unbeknownst to Aileen, I was about to ask her to help me get a job with the EEOC. But first, I asked her how she got the appointment (which is what this piece is all about.)

Bright, attractive, knowledgeable Aileen, dismissed her appointment as the work of a computer,. Apparently someone did for Lyndon B. Johnson and Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr. what Haberman suggested that Paterson do: "find a gay, black, Roman Catholic woman with a Latino surname..." However, at the time, gays had no clout and I don't think Aileen had come out yet. But this is what she told me and I remember it as if it was yesterday: "They wanted a black female with labor and EEO experience, and the fact that I had a Spanish name also helped. I was black, I was female, I worked for the ILGWU and the California FEP. So I popped out of the computer and got the appointment." I never knew Aileen's religion. Her parents were from Jamaica. Her father made artists' brushes and her mother had worked as a seamstress.

Aileen and I are still in touch. She lives in San Francisco, and for the past 40 years has headed her own consulting firm, Aileen C. Hernandez, Associates. She has struggled, as most of us have, with conflicting values and conflicting identities. Labor vs. race, gender vs. race, sexual orientation vs. everything. I never knew why she left EEOC. Did she think she could do better as a consultant? Aileen had been the Western Vice President of the National Organization for Women from 1967 to 1970. NOW didn't have too many black members. In 1970, Aileen was elected President, succeeding Betty Freidan. She resigned in 1971. She may have felt that NOW was using her to attract black women, but was doing nothing to address the concerns of black women or lesbians.

Oh yes. We had a wonderful lunch (I picked up the check) and we enjoyed catching up. However, she said she really couldn't help me get a job with EEOC.

Haberman ends his article insisting that Paterson comb upstate New York for a gay black Roman Catholic woman with a Latino surname and a Jewish connection. Sorry. Aileen doesn't live in upstate New York, but she has almost every other "qualification." But Paterson can do a lot worse.

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It is January 26, and on January 21, the "top contender" for the Senate seat, vacated by Hilary Clinton, Caroline Kennedy, withdrew her name from consideration Gov. Paterson did pick up on Haberman's suggestion with regard to a female and an upstate New Yorker. I guess there wasn't a black Catholic lesbian around, so he named an unknown Congresswoman from upstate New York, Kirsten E. Gillibrand, and she will be New York's next Senator. Mazel Tov, Kirsten.