

“We Wait Too Long”

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In the early 1970's, as the Director of State Affairs for the student government of the University of Maryland, I was the liaison and representative of the 30,000 students at the University of Maryland to the Maryland State Government. For a little over three years, I frequently testified before the Maryland State Senate and House of Delegates, lobbied on various bills and met with then Governor Marvin Mandel and other State officials about issues that had an impact on students or were of interest to young people and the university.

During those years the amendment lowering the voting age from 21 to 18 passed and was implemented. I organized a voter registration drive at the University of Maryland, and within a year, over 9,000 new voters were registered as a result of those efforts.

Some of you may recall the early 70's was also when Maryland first started to build its basketball program under the direction of Lefty Driesell. Lefty came to Maryland and pledged to make the Terrapins a basketball powerhouse. He said he wanted to, “Make Maryland the UCLA of the East.” With Bill Walton, Lou Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul Jabar) and others UCLA was the dominant force in college basketball.

At the same time, another California locale was known not for its sports prowess, but as a bastion of student activism: the University of California at Berkeley, where students had become very involved in the political process, holding positions on the City Council.

In order to attract attention to the campaign to get students registered to vote, I took out ads in the Diamondback, the student newspaper which played off Lefty Driesell's statements to make Maryland the UCLA of the East. Our ads said, “Make Maryland the Berkeley of the East. Register to vote.” These announcements and advertisements caught the attention not just of the student body, but of others as well.

One individual who was determined to try to make sure that Maryland not become the Berkeley of the East was the head of the Prince Georges County Board of Elections, Bob Antonetti.

As a result, when students entered the Student Union Ballroom to register to vote, he would ask them where they were from rather than where they wanted to register to vote. It was meant to confuse them and get them to register in their hometowns, rather than in a concentrated bloc as residents of College Park in Prince Georges County. There were a number of other things that were done to discourage students from registering in Prince Georges County. When the largest number of kids would come in, he would send most of the registrars to lunch during the peak hours to make the lines even longer. He then would go up to those waiting, point to the other lines and suggest that students just go ahead and register from their parents' address, since those lines were shorter, and so they would not be late to class.

To try to prevent these practices from I registered a formal complaint and also called a press conference denouncing these tactics. All of the local media outlets, including television stations from Baltimore and Washington as well as the local newspapers covered the story.

One afternoon, after the registration drive had closed for the day, during the height of our confrontation, Mr. Antonetti invited me to go out with him for a drink. I declined, explaining to him I couldn't since I was only 19 years old, thus under the legal age of 21.

Fast forward to the last elections, November of 2006. I was surprised to notice that none other than Bob Antonetti had been called out of retirement to run the elections for Prince Georges County one more time. His name appeared in the news several times in relation to some problems with the voting machines in the elections in November of 2006.

A few months later, after things quieted down, after almost 35 years, I placed a call to Mr. Antonetti at the Elections Board. I immediately got through to him, and when he picked up the phone, I said, "Hi Bob, this is Stuart Weinblatt." I waited, expecting to need to remind him who I was, but it turns out it was not necessary. Although we had not spoken in over three decades, he immediately said, "Hi Stuart, how have you been?"

We chatted briefly. I told him that I was now a rabbi in the Potomac area, and he told me that he has children who live in Montgomery County, not far from the synagogue.

I reminded him of his invitation to go out for a drink, and said that I was now old enough to do so, and would love to take him up on the offer.

He told me he would very much like to do that and would get in touch with me in a few weeks to follow up and set up a time to get together.

Imagine my surprise a few weeks later when I happened to read in the Washington Post that Robert Antonetti, Sr., former Director of the Prince Georges County Board of Elections died suddenly at the age of 73 of a heart attack.

I lament and regret that we never had the chance to go out for that drink. How I would have liked to see him, to be together at least one more time. I thought about what we would have discussed -- about all that had transpired all those years ago. I thought about what I would want him to know about me and the turns my life had taken. Deep down I probably even wanted to apologize for being so brash when I declined the first invitation.

Perhaps you have people you have lost touch with over the years – a teacher, a mentor, a colleague, a first boss, an old friend, who you wish you could see and speak with. At Yizkor, we think of the loved ones who are no longer here and of those we would so much like to see. We may think about those with whom we wish we could have that drink or conversation. How we long to hear their voice and counsel, to let them know what is going on in our lives, to feel the warmth of their embrace, their words of encouragement, their love.

Part of what we hold onto at Yizkor are the memories of those we once held dear, and who once held us tight. We fondly remember the loved ones who are no longer here.

But let us also think about those we would like to see, who are still here. Sometimes we wait too long to reach out to those who are still here. There may be family members and loved ones from whom we have become estranged, and we may miss their not being a part of our lives. In some instances, it may not be possible to make amends and repair the breaks or family fissures. But if it is at all possible to try to reach out, to make peace, then try. Try before it is too late, before they too are gone.

While lamenting that our days are few, we act as if they were infinite. We often wait too long to do what must be done today. We wait too long to express thanks, to give encouragement, to set aside slights. Part of the message of this service and of this season is to remind us that we know not when we will last walk on this earth, but that our time is finite. Our tradition implores us to make the most of the moments that God gives to us. In the end, all we leave behind are memories and the deeds we performed. It is in that spirit that Yizkor, the prayer of memory, is recited. It is in that spirit that we come together today and remember loved ones and honor their memory.

These quiet moments of memory move us to honor our loved ones – both those who are gone and those who are still here.

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