

Thank you, Jim

Most of us can look back at some seemingly random event that changed our lives in a significant and unexpected way. For me, that event was meeting with **Jim McGarvey** at the 1975 Montana State AFL-CIO convention.

I was at the convention because my local had elected me president and petitioned for a representation election. I knew nothing—about running a local, about organizing for an election, about collective bargaining—nothing.

Jim was executive director of the Montana Federation of Teachers (MFT) at the time and the guy who was supposed to bail me out.

That meeting was my first step in becoming a labor activist, a role that would consume a good part of my life for the next 25 years. Jim was responsible for that.

Through teaching, cajoling, leading, and arm twisting, he dragged me into the life of the union. With his help, we eventually won our election and began to bargain. Jim recruited me to be MFT's treasurer, to lobby the legislature, and to represent Montana on a Program and Policy Council for the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

What makes Jim tick

We also became friends, floating Montana rivers, exchanging news about our kids, and as time went on, comparing notes about our various aches and pains.

Through all this, I learned a great deal about what made Jim tick and what made him such an effective and highly respected labor leader. I believe that following his example allowed me to do things well that I might otherwise never have done at all.

Jim was, first and foremost, an organizer. He believed that organizing new locals, signing up new members, and securing bargaining rights for more teachers and state employees were the heart and soul of the union.

He was convinced, of course, that there were all sorts of people out there who badly needed representation. But he also wanted to make the MFT as big, inclusive, and powerful as it could be. And that's what happened.

In 1975, MFT had about 300 members. By the time we merged with the Montana Education Association (MEA), that number had grown more than tenfold. For several years, MFT was the fastest growing state federation in the AFT. Now, merged with MEA, we represent educators, public employees, and health care workers across Montana. We are the largest union in the state.

I also learned from Jim to never stop talking, to never close the door on negotiations, to never turn your back on the possibility of reaching an agreement.

As we all know, feelings can run pretty high at the bargaining table or at the state capitol. But getting mad and taking your marbles home rarely gets you anywhere. Negotiation does.

Late night phone calls

Sometimes, Jim's willingness to keep the door open got him into trouble. Democrats didn't like his willingness to deal with Governor Marc Racicot. Some MFT members couldn't understand his willingness to merge with MEA after the bitter raiding of the '70s and '80s.

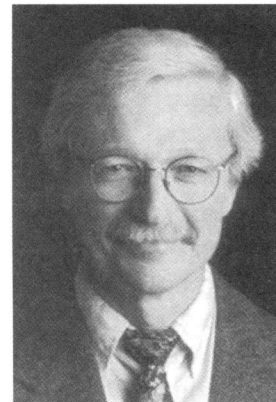
But Jim believed, and I think he was right, that these relationships would serve the union's best interests, and he persevered.

Finally, Jim showed everyone around him that there was never enough energy and dedication that you could give to the union. Weekends, holidays, nights, days—it didn't make any difference, he was thinking about the union.

This too, could cause problems: he would occasionally forget that other people had other lives and needs. Sleep, for example. The telephone could ring any time, although 5:30 a.m. and midnight seemed to be his favorite hours. Local officers everywhere shuddered when he got his first car phone.

Jim now leaves MEA-MFT after serving as vice president since merger. He should leave proud of his contribution and aware of the gratitude of thousands of union members.

But he will still be working on your behalf at the state AFL-CIO. So don't be thinking those midnight calls are finally over. God speed, Jim. ■



BY DICK BARRETT
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