

Something to Prove

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Meliora Hero's Journey

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On a cool fall evening, I invited all eight of my grandchildren over for a bonfire and to tell some of my life stories. My 75th birthday is just around the corner and I thought to share some milestones from my life. We all gathered around and had some hot chocolate and marshmallows. It was time for the stories to begin.

I grew up in Bridgeport near White Sox park. It's a little southwest of downtown. I lived with my parents, Bruno and Helen and my older brother. His name was Bruno Jr. but everyone called him J.R. He was six years older than me and unfortunately he passed away 22 years ago. Our grandma lived with us too. We called her Busia, which means grandmother in polish and she only spoke polish. I only learned a few words in polish because the adults in my family spoke in polish when they didn't want the kids to know what they were saying. My dad was a painter - mostly office buildings downtown with his brother and brother in law. My mom also worked full time. She worked on an assembly line for Martin Senour paint.

It was great in Bridgeport. One of my best memories was running to see the firemen when they got a call to go to a fire. The firehouse was just a few blocks away and all of the kids on the block would run to the corner to wave and watch the trucks go by.

We would spend summers at my aunt and uncle's in Batavia. It was like the country out there back then. We would have a great time with our cousins who were the same age as my brother and I.

When I was in 7th grade, we got exciting news that they were going to build an expressway. I was thinking about how much faster it would be to get out to Batavia. What I didn't realize is that they had to knock down our house to make room for the expressway. That's

when we moved to the Brighton Park neighborhood which was a little further west. I'm glad we moved to Brighton Park. My cousins lived next door. My future wife, Shirley (Grandma), had the same numbers in her address as me but lived on a different street a couple of blocks away. We would always get their mail and I would bring the mail over and her mom really liked me. Eventually, I met your grandma and we got married in 1951, when I was 19 and she was 18. The other neat thing was that our new place had running hot water and a bath tub. When I lived in Bridgeport, we had to warm up water on the stove and my mom would bring out a small round iron tub and take a bath in the kitchen. That was normal back then.

When I was growing up, I guess you can say I was a prankster and I liked a good laugh. A little after I started at the new school, I came in after recess and put a snake on the nun's desk. The look on her face was priceless and she never figured out that it was me. Another time I was with one of my friends on "the other side" of the tracks. It was getting late and we really weren't supposed to be in that area. It was time to come home for supper and I didn't want to get in trouble - again! Unfortunately, a train was stopped on the tracks and it was blocking my way to get home. I waited and waited. I had a great idea - I laid down on the ground next to the train. I was thinking to roll under the train. I thought I could roll once to the middle and then a second time out the other side. Just as I laid down on the ground, the train began to move. It scared the daylights out of me. I ended up waiting for the train to finish and only being a minute late.

Another time, I was hanging out again by the train tracks with a friend of mine, Paul. We noticed that the dumpster was overflowing with unused paint tubes color. I had the idea to stomp on the tubes and watch the paint squirt out. Then we started squirting them at each other. We lined up the tubes on the train tracks, hundreds of them, and when the next train passed, paint

shot out one by one like a machine gun. It was really something awesome to see. It wasn't until after their paint fight that I noticed that I was covered in paint. I ran home to the basement and got undressed and started to scrub the paint off. Just as I was scrubbing, my Busia came down and saw me and she almost fell over. I put my clothes into the coal stove and burned them. When my mom got home from work, she said, "Oh my goodness, what happened to you?" My Busia was laughing and said, "You should have seen him before he washed up!"

We liked to hang out at a soda shop a couple of blocks from my house. One of our friends, Joe, would always come in and drink out of everyone else's bottle. One day we had an idea to get him. We were hanging out and he wasn't there yet. We put warm tea in a bottle and left it on the table. It couldn't have worked out better. Joe came in, saw the bottle, thought it was a coke, picked it up and took a long drink. He said, "Yuck, what was that?" My friend Jack said, "Pee!" Joe had a horrible look on his face, ran outside and threw up. He never drank out of our bottles after that.

J.R. was drafted to the army. When he came back he saw a group of us playing dice on the street for money. J.R. came to play with us and he told me to get out of the game. I was mad and said "No." Then he gave me \$5 and made me get out. One by one he knocked each of them out and won all of their money. I was so surprised because I didn't think he really knew the dice game. I got him to tell me his secret. J.R. told me that a bunch of guys played dice while he was in the army. His first week playing with them, he lost his whole paycheck. After that, he watched and watched and watched and learned to cheat at dice. J.R. tried to teach me but I could

never figure it out. I couldn't believe that's what he learned at the army. He really got the other kids.

My first job was painting golf balls. I remember they used to make trick balls that had the weight off center. Soon after starting there, I went golfing with my uncle and his friend. They were very competitive and would play each other every few weeks. In the middle of the game, it was neck and neck, when Bill was distracted, I set down one of my trick balls in the place of his ball. He went up to take his turn and the ball curved and went almost in a circle. Oh the look on his face was so funny! I love getting a reaction out of people. I had to let him in on my secret that it was a trick ball.

After the golf ball company, I moved up to unloading pallets at a warehouse. When I was a senior in high school, my parents bought a pizza place on the north side of the city. That was a turning point in my life. My dad sat me down to talk about having a family business. My brother was off married with kids by this point. It was my time to step up and leave the tricks aside.

I had the responsibility of taking the bus for over an hour every day after school to Maria's, opening it up and starting the ovens. It had a big bright sign from the previous owner, Maria, that we ended up leaving up. I'd work all evening, helping my dad make and deliver pizzas and my mom would work the counter. The business was okay but it never took off. My parents decided to sell it about a year later. It wasn't until after we sold it that we found out that Maria's was known in the neighborhood for bad food and bad service. My dad said he would have changed that sign right away had he known. I was upset because I felt like we had

something of our own and we had to give it up. That experience really taught me about job security and having something to fall back on.

Then I went to work with my dad and uncles as a painter. It was good work and I really enjoyed being with them. We had our first son, your uncle Rob, on November 13th, 1964. That was the second event in my life that made me feel like things changed. The ups and downs of working as a painter were no longer enough. Sometimes there was no work for a whole week. That's when I got to thinking. What job is most secure? I had an idea - policemen and firemen never get laid off or go out of business. I signed up to take the police exam. The first step was the physical. I went in to headquarters, they measured my height at 5'7" and 7/8ths and they immediately sent me home. Wouldn't you know it, but you had to be 5'8" tall to be a police officer. Could that be it? I felt determined.

I made a decision that I just had to get on the fire department. The first thing I did was buy a "stretcho" machine that I hung on every night for months to try to gain some height. I started asking everyone about what I could do to get on the fire department. The precinct captain said that I would have to stand on my wallet. And I was willing to. I went to talk to the alderman. He said that he was friends with the fire commissioner, Ray Orozco and that he would introduce me. I was thrilled. I wanted to look the commissioner in the eye and ask him how 1/8th of an inch could prevent me from being the best firefighter out there. So the day came. I went downtown to Commissioner Orozco's office only to find out that he was vacationing in Ireland with mayor Daley. I was furious. The alderman didn't take me seriously. I found the captain on duty at the commissioner's office to talk to. He said, "Oh man, if it was anything besides height, maybe I could do something." But they wouldn't make any exceptions for

height. He suggested I injure my feet so they would swell up or hit myself on the head and give myself a goose egg for the extra height. I left there defeated.

That night, I called J.R. He said, "Sure I'll hit you on the head... just let me know when!" So I made a plan. I applied to the fire department. The time came for the physical and my brother backed out. He was afraid that he would really injure me. So it was up to me. I taped together the biggest fishing weights I had and covered them with a sock and made myself a blackjack. Was I really going to go through with it? Whack! I did it, screamed and saw stars. It was more painful than I thought. Then a goose egg started to form. I never shared that story with anyone until recently. The next day I was first in line. They went to measure me, I curled up my toes and took a deep breath. The examiner said, hey you can't stand like that. Feet flat on the ground. So I took a deep breath again and tightened my posture. He said, "Hey, cut that out. No cheating!" So, a third time, I tightened up and took a deep breath. He called another tester over and asked him a question. All the while, I was holding my breath. Then finally he said 5'8", right on the head. Whew, I did it!

Now, I had to wait to get called. The way it works, you take a the test and then they rank everyone and use the list for future classes. Once they call you, you go to the fire academy for at least sixty days for training.

In the meantime, I took a job as a railroad cop. It was a nice cushy job too. I walked through the train cars just showing my presence. Nothing ever happened. The only tough part of my job was in the middle of the night I had to walk out to the middle of the railroad yard and check a few cars. One night, it was really cold, I was second guessing myself. I kind of had a

cushy job. I started thinking, do I really want to be a firefighter and have to pour water out in cold like this? The next week, I was laid off. It was a sign. I was still looking for the stability. I switched to a different railroad and then I was called by the fire department.

I started the academy December 15th, 1965. The academy was longer than 60 days. I started my first day of actual work on April 1st, 1966 at 14th and Michigan on Squad 8. Wouldn't you know it, my captain was one of the guys that we would wave to on the corner when I was a kid in Bridgeport. My first year salary was \$5,600. It was for a 56 hour work week because Chicago firemen work one day on the job and two days off. In July 1966, we had a daughter. We ended up having five kids in all. I was happy to have one 24 hour shift and 48 hours off because I was able to spend a lot of time with the kids as they were growing up. I was able to make it to a lot of important events because of the fire department schedule.

A lot of people thought you had to know someone to get on the fire department. People that knew me kept asking me who I knew or who did I pay off. They didn't believe me either when I told them that I just took the test. It was difficult to get on the job without knowing someone in charge.

My first boss was Chief Mariotti. He showed me the ropes, what to look out for and what not to be bothered with. He helped me a lot at the beginning and followed me through my career until he retired. I'm thankful for him. I learned so much and I was able to get off to the right start.

The next major test in my life was when I went into a fire in 1966. I wasn't on the job very long. It was just like other fires that I've been to except there were four kids still in the

house. Now let me tell you, in a fire, it's not like on tv. It's pitch black. You can't see inches in front of you. We didn't have masks back then. In the middle of the fire while we were searching for the fourth child, I thought I was going to die. I was looking for a way to get some air - a window or a door. Just then McMan called over and said he found him. I helped him carry the boy out. He ended up falling down the stairs on his way back out of the fire. We took turns giving that child CPR. While one of us was giving CPR the other was puking.

On fire prevention day in October the fire department recognizes the previous year's rescues. I was a runner up for the most prestigious rescue award - the Carter Harrison/Lambert Tree award. They gave us medals and even \$250. That was a lot of money back then and I really didn't expect it.

Other firemen talked about how the driver of the truck (the engineer) had the safest job. An engineer has to drive the truck and send water. I decided that I was going to study for the next engineer's test. I worked hard studying hydraulics. I memorized different formulas and tips. While I was studying for the exam, my firehouse, Squad 8, went out of service. I was moved to a west side firehouse. They turned my first firehouse on 14th and Michigan into a restaurant called The Firehouse Restaurant.

The guys in this new house didn't study very much. This was another test. I was constantly getting teased. They would say things like "Oohh Bobby, are you studying again?" or "Oohh look Bobby is going to be an engineer." I couldn't figure it out at first but then the engineer at that house gave me some tips and he explained their thinking to me. Even the

firemen on the job thought that you had to know someone to get promoted. They thought I was wasting my time studying and again I was out to prove a point.

Testing day came and after the test, a group of guys went to the local bar. We were talking about the exam and they were saying how hard the exam was and who knew this question or that question. They said they never even heard of some of the material on the test. I was thinking to myself I knew that answer and oh that was an easy one. That's when it hit me, maybe I had a shot at really getting promoted. I ranked #6 out of everyone who took the test. I was promoted to engineer January 1st, 1970.

Other people in the neighborhood said, don't tell me you don't have clout meaning don't tell me you don't know someone. First you get on the job and now you get promoted. You have to know someone.

There were no real enemies on the job. Everyone got along and boy there were some characters. I'd have to say that my biggest enemy was the arsonists who liked starting the fires. It was always a challenge to figure out who, what, when, where, how and why a fire started.

I started studying right away for my next promotion exam. I didn't score as well on the lieutenant's exam. I was number 229 and I was the last group called to be promoted from that exam on May 15th, 1973. Again, I felt like it was a calling. I counted the years that I had left to work because mandatory retirement age was 63. I decided to buckle down and work on studying again. I counted the years and I was thinking if they have a chief's exam every four or five years then I could have a chance at getting promoted to chief before I retire.

I heard that there was this chief by the name of Latas who held a study group in his basement for the captain's exam. I looked for a reason to run into Chief Latas and I asked him if I could get into his study class. He said, "No, sorry it's full." A few weeks later I asked again and he said, "No." I found out that he thought my house had a reputation for being lazy and didn't want to open his class up. The third time worked. He let me into his class and I learned much better study methods and ways to remember things.

They added an oral test to the promotion exam after that. The first time I took the Captain's exam, I didn't score so well on the oral part. I couldn't understand the guy who was giving the exam. I took the captain's exam a couple of times. Another captain told me that my time would come. I was thinking that maybe I was too young. I also heard that if they don't want you to that you'll never make it to chief. Luckily, I had Mariotti to mentor me and keep my head on straight and I had the support of Latas' study group.

I'm glad I didn't give in to the opinions of others. I kept after it. While I was working on getting promoted to captain, I had the opportunity to work as an instructor at the fire academy. I was teaching classes for new firemen. All of my studying paid off in the sense that I was a pretty good instructor.

Then the day came. I finally got promoted to Captain 1988. It was kind of a joke that I was the lieutenant that took the longest to get promoted - 15 years. I took the Chief's exam in 1993 and scored pretty well. I achieved my goal and I got promoted to Chief in 1995. My first year as chief, I didn't have a set firehouse to work out of. I was considered a reliever. I got to travel all around the city and work with different groups of guys. Man was that an experience! I

eventually settled down and worked at a house on the southwest side until I retired in 2004.

Looking back, I really enjoyed my time on the fire department. I had a great career. What I didn't share yet is that I was able to go back to my prankster personality. I had many opportunities to play tricks on other guys on the job. I have to save sharing my fire department pranks for another story night!