

One UniServ Director Recalls How It Was, Then

Dick Bernard, August 19, 2016

I was teaching in western North Dakota when my wife, Barbara's, critical illness required a kidney transplant. At the time (1965), only a few hospitals did this procedure, and one was the University of Minnesota Hospital in Minneapolis.

We were very young, 22 and 25, and our son, Tom, was 1 ½. If the transplant succeeded, Barbara would have to remain in the area in the event of rejection, so I had to look for a new job, and on July 21, 1965, I signed a teaching contract in the Anoka-Hennepin School District. (The office where I signed was in the then-Anoka High School, from which Garrison Keillor had graduated a few years earlier.)

As things happen, Barbara died three days later, on July 24, and I was in a new city, widowed with an infant, and in a month began a new life near drowning in medical expense debt and teaching at the brand new Roosevelt Junior High School in suburban Blaine.

The Teachers Association, AHEA, was the farthest thing from my mind.

In 1968, at Roosevelt, my teaching colleague, Ron Swanson, became President of AHEA. One day – I can still visualize this – he came by with his cardboard box of Association stuff (the filing cabinet), and complained of a migraine headache. The job of EA Prez had its own stresses. We had a Federation presence in our building, and they were always complaining about what the Association wasn't doing. I decided at that very moment that either I'd be part of the problem, or part of the solution, and I volunteered to be building rep.

Anoka-Hennepin, then, was already a large, explosively growing and cash poor school district with well over 1,000 teachers. It had always been Association, but the Federation of Teachers saw opportunities. A new "Meet and Confer" Law passed in 1967 required proportional representation, and MFT qualified for one of five members on the bargaining team. This gave MFT a platform, and they could criticize with no responsibility, since they were a small minority.

In 1970-71, I agreed to become the local newsletter editor for AHEA, and in Jan. 1972 became President-elect.

Shortly after my election the then-UniServ Director, our second in two years, resigned because of a personal problem. I was asked to take the position for six months. This was in March, 1972. NEA Regional Director Jim Connerton and MEA Field Services Director Barney Palmer delivered the keys to me at our forlorn tiny office above the barber shop in the Anoka Movie Theater building.

I became one of those UniServ folks, hired to serve two locals, Anoka-Hennepin and Osseo, beginning the process of representing approximately 1,200 members in a UniServ Unit. I would guess that ultimately there were about 1,000 people like myself, UniServ Directors, on duty around the United States. NEA, then, had more than a million members, I think.

We were in the "wild west" phase when I began my tour of duty. 1972 was the first collectively bargained contract with a grievance procedure ending in binding arbitration.

Some of us might have pretended we knew what we were doing. But we were pioneers. We learned by our abundant mistakes.

As Garrison Keillor said so often, we did what needed to be done, often not sure what that was, even, nor how to do it. We learned one lesson at a time, hopefully a couple of steps ahead of our members. Speaking only for myself. Meaning came to “trial and error”.

Anoka-Hennepin Education Association firmly took the reins as Exclusive Representative in 1974. Osseo Education Association could not muster sufficient support to call for an election. My duties became solely for Anoka-Hennepin, which continued to grow rapidly.

The Minnesota EA was getting accustomed to the idea of unified membership and UniServ; the NEA was very helpful. While assigned to one set of locals, we staff helped each other out in sundry ways, in other places, as needed.

I remember in particular a couple of NEA “road warriors” who came in at crucial times at the very beginning of my career:

Arnold Erickson was a field organizer from Ohio, I think, who mostly came in to dispense courage to those of us attempting to negotiate our first contract under the bargaining law. **Dorothy Brooksby**(sp?), who seemed like a kindly grandmother from Arizona, came in to do a local Association assessment, interviewing community members, and soon revealed herself to be one tough cookie. She surprised us all.

We went to NEA conferences to learn how people like Saul Alinsky (who, unknown to me, had died just months after I began my staff career) did organizing.

The variety of experiences were essential for us.

We made bad mistakes; so did management and school board. Both sides plugged along, usually learning from the mistakes. As the years went on relationships matured and while there were still problems to be solved and occasional crises to deal with, they became less frequent, and more manageable.

As time passed, most new management representatives had previous experience as Association reps, and better understood the rules and roles and dilemmas of the teachers Union, as opposed to the pre-UniServ days when there was a very sharp role definition of labor versus management. (Today, one of my daughters is a school principal, and former Association Rep. Another is a School Board member....)

Nowadays, I venture, most Education Association members have no idea what UniServ was, and little sense of the history that preceded them, and it is their loss. Without the courage of NEA leaders to first go for unified membership, and then establish the UniServ and related programs, now near 50 years ago, the landscape for public school employees would not be as it now is, even with all the crises in recent years.

UniServ was an experiment which succeeded.