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Giants Among the People

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

January 16, 2014

When I was young, there were three pictures in my parents' hallway -- Jesus Christ, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John L. Lewis, President of the United Mine Workers Union. These men informed my family's political and life perspective.

My Dad was born in Red Lodge into an Irish-American coal mining family. Raised during the Great Depression, his family had little, but worked hard, treasuring the Treasure State and its people. They believed in Unions -- protecting workers like themselves, people who ultimately made everything happen, and believed in workers' right to organize to make lives better. That principle was found in their politics and their Catholic faith. Just out of high school, Dad joined the New Deal's CCC, reinforcing his trust in FDR. He eventually got a job at Douglas Aircraft in Los Angeles, working during the day, boxing at night for a dollar a round.

Across the neighbor's fence in L.A. he spotted a gorgeous 5 foot brunette with deep brown eyes and a big city swagger. She was a Jewish beauty, born in Connecticut. Her father, a graduate of the London Conservatory of Music, emigrated to America, becoming a US Army doughboy in WWI. He composed and arranged music, first in New York, then in Hollywood where he arranged music for films like "Gone with the Wind." She too was musical, once penning a song done by Frank Sinatra.

She immediately fell in love with this cowboy-boxer from Montana, and he was smitten, too. Turns out they were born five days and a continent apart, but fate had brought them together. Against odds they rashly, but happily married. Then came Pearl Harbor. Dad enlisted in the Navy, but before going overseas he was hit with asthma. The Navy sent him home to Montana, searching for clean air for his lungs, with his young wife alongside.

My Mom went from a maids-in-the-house youth to a Montana log cabin with an outhouse and hand-pumped well water. They worked hard so their growing family -- ultimately six sons -- could get by. They never had enough of anything but love for each other, their family and a commitment to community as a way to make life better for their children. While they had little, they knew many who had even less. They were part of the little people who believed in the American Dream where things would improve for all citizens together.

Beyond demonstrating the value of hard work, they also showed us the lessons of tolerance. For how else could kids of that time with a Jewish mother see the world, being raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, one of the greatest atrocities in human

history? The Jewish people had suffered pains of intolerance unimaginable even to the Irish-Catholics, who had themselves found prejudice in America years before.

There's a joke that being both Jewish and Catholic gives you guilt on both sides. But in reality, we learned from both sides the lessons that intolerance painfully brought to the world. So, with enlightened parents, we emerged with a tolerance for others' beliefs, but also our own firm belief in people over power.

Mom is now 94. She's still strong, but age is slowly taking its toll. They were married for 63 years until the day Dad passed, about 10 years ago. He was powerful, but taught us to be concerned for the weak. He was a true Christian, adhering to Christ's principles from the Sermon on the Mount. Mom brought us the Jewish tradition of "caring for the least of us" that Christ, himself a Jew, embodied. They both taught us to seek opportunity and fairness for all, a commitment to workers and a belief that we were a part of a community, not just stand-alone individuals.

What we give to our children to pass on to their children is shaped immeasurably by what we were given by our parents. So, in our family we pass on values, faith, ethical standards, selflessness, and commitment to workers, to community and to the least among us.

We remember the three pictures of the giants on our hallway wall, but most importantly, we remember the life lessons we learned from our parents. Though they were the little people, they were themselves giants - the kind of giants this country needs!

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking of the giants among us.

Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.