

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU History

O.H. 2183

Robert Bernat

Interviewed

By

Lesley Durkin

On

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: Robert Bernat

INTERVIEWER: Lesley Durkin

SUBJECT: YSU History

DATE: March 28, 2004

P: This is an interview with Robert Bernat for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on YSU History, by Lesley Durkin, at Mr. Bernat's house, on March 28, 2004. At 12:30 p.m. This project was funded by the Ford Foundation.

D: Could you give me your name and age?

RB: Robert Bernat, I'm 38 years old.

D: Could you tell me when you were born?

RB: I was born August 1, 1965.

D: Okay, and where?

RB: Youngstown, Ohio, at St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

D: How many siblings do you have?

RB: There's eight in my family including me, I have three sisters and four brothers.

D: Are they younger or older than you?

RB: They are all older than I am.

D: That would be you're the baby. Could you tell me your parents' names and their occupations?

RB: Donald R. Bernat is my father, he's a physician, and my mother is Millicent Barbara, she's a housewife.

D: Did your parents attend college? Obviously your father did, could you tell me where?

RB: My father attended Youngstown College before it was a state university, and then he went on and got his medical degree from Creighton University. My mother graduated from a school somewhere in England when she was around 14 or 15 years old, and that was the extent of her education.

D: Where did you grow up?

RB: I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio, on the West Side.

D: Could you describe your neighborhood for me? Like take a walk through your neighborhood as you were growing up.

RB: The neighborhood was great; it had a lot of kids, probably upwards of between 20 and 30 kids in the neighborhood, all around the same ages, so there was always lots of things to do. We had a large field not too far from my house where we always played baseball in the summertime and played football in the wintertime, and it was busy all the time.

D: Could you describe your home?

RB: No. (Laughter)

D: Without referring to it as "Woodside?"

RB: I've suppressed all of those memories. (Much Laughter) I grew up in a very happy home; both parents were caring and considerate of us kids, and tried to give us as much love as possible. Having eight of us in the house, you'd think that after raising six or seven kids that they would have been tired of doing it for the eighth one, but they weren't, but they had lots of support; they had support from my big brothers and big sisters in helping to raise me.

D: And your four little vagabonds that trailed after you.

RB: Yea, and my little brothers and sisters who were actually nieces and nephews that came right after me and lived in the same house, so it was a really nice atmosphere.

D: Could you describe your ethnic background for me.

RB: Not a whole lot of ethnicity within my family unit, we were more or less Americans, although my mother never became a citizen and my father met her in England during World War II and brought her back over here. So I guess the most ethnicity that I was prone to when I was growing up was most likely the English heritage.

D: Could you tell me about when you went to school? Grade school, middle school, where exactly did you go?

RB: Well, I went to public school all the way through elementary school. I went to Kirkmere, a nice school, I went to kindergarten there, first grade through sixth I had a great time going to Kirkmere, it was a nice school. I got in a lot of trouble when I was a little kid in school, paddled at least once a year all the way up until the seventh grade. Starting in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade was at Volney Rogers Junior High School, which was about a half-a-mile away from my house, less than, so it was really interesting to be able to walk to school, and the trouble that you could get into on the way to and from school, not that I didn't get in a lot of trouble riding the bus to Kirkmere with my nieces and nephews who I had to protect all those years, that was a lot of protecting. And so that was great, and I went to Chaney High School, and had an absolute ball at Chaney High School; played football, played baseball, did a little bit of track, was in the Drama Club, did all kinds of things.

D: See how they run when you were in your underwear! (Laughter)

RB: That's right, I was the Vicker. So I had a great childhood growing up, I had a great time going through grade school, high school, then I went on to Youngstown State University – is that the next question?

D: No.

RB: Am I ahead of myself?

D: You're ahead of yourself, but that's okay though, that's okay.

RB: Well, then I attended Youngstown State University for about a year, dropped out, went to Akron University for about a semester, dropped out, took about a year off, and met a girl and got married, went back to Youngstown State University and finally ended up getting my degree some years later.

D: Back to your grade school, were there any influential teachers that you could say you could look back on now that you can treasure that memory of that teacher because in some way they influenced you as to where you are now?

RB: I enjoyed a lot of my teachers, but the two that stand out in my mind were in grade school. In third grade I had a lady by the name of Mrs. Abbass, who passed away last year. Really nice lady, just was caring with the kids, really helped us to pursue, she was a little eccentric, and she taught us to pursue our artistic side, which I have none, but at least I was able to realize it when I was that young that I had no artistic talent, and she encouraged it anyway. So she was a great influence early on, and that was in third grade, so I was approximately eight years old, eight or nine. And then Mr. Vanarsky in the sixth grade was a huge influence because it was at a point in my life where I was twelve years old, and athletics were starting to become more and more important to me, and he was always extremely enthusiastic about articles that were in the paper where if I had scored a touchdown, or if I had had a homerun in a game, and he always encouraged that kind of thing in class, he used to read an article every week from the newspaper, and you know, kids would bring in stuff they saw and was always encouraging it.

D: What kind of influence would you say your parents had on your education?

RB: My father had a lot of influence on my education. He had always wanted us to attend college and wanted us to do well in school, which...

D: Medical school. (Laughter)

RB: No, he knew I didn't have it, he always told me, "You don't have what it takes to be a doctor." But he did encourage education, and to the fullest extent of it, but what was most important to my father was that people knew that you were honest and hard-working, and that you would find your own success in your own happiness, that success was not something that you had to go to medical school to find, or law school to find, that success was something that you could find as a welder, or a warehouseman, or a lawyer I guess.

D: He loved lawyers.

RB: That was important. My mother, she didn't care so much about the education part of it, she just wanted us all to be happy and get out of the house someday.

D: What years did you attend YSU? Because you were kind of in and out of there for a minute.

RB: Yea, I was in '83 and '84, then I was out for a while and I got back into it. I guess I got back to YSU around '86, finished up with my first degree in '87, second degree in '89, and I'm currently working on my Master's Degree from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I'll be completed with that next year in May, 2005.

D: What were your two degrees in that you have from Youngstown State?

RB: My first degree was an Associate's Degree in Labor Studies, which is actually a field that I work in today, I enjoy it very much. It was a two-year degree, they didn't have a four-year degree at that point at YSU in Labor Studies, so in order to go on and get my Bachelor's Degree, I had to switch over to the Management School, and get my degree in Labor Relations. So I had these Labor Studies classes, which taught me all about organized labor from the working man's view, and then I had to switch over in order to get my Bachelor's Degree and go over to the management side, and ended up getting my Bachelor's Degree in Labor Relations.

D: Very interesting. How did you pay for school?

RB: It is paid for by the way. The interesting part of it is when I started college my father told me, as long as you get good grades and you continue to try then he would help support me through college and pay for it. And as you heard earlier about a year into it, I wasn't doing so well, so I paid for college through the Pell Grant, and I got student loans through Mahoning Bank, the local bank, and built up a lot of bills over the years, probably in excess of – and this doesn't sound like a lot now, but back in the eighties it was; when I finished school I probably owed about \$16,000 for a four-year degree, which is probably the cost of a years worth of tuition now, which is why YSU was such a great school to go to back then, a state university, it was convenient, it was inexpensive, and I got a great education there.

D: Let's go on a walking tour of campus, how it looked when you attended, because you attended in the eighties. What did the buildings and the grounds look like?

RB: They looked cold and dark when I attended, and that's the truth of the matter because I was not a traditional student, I worked during the course of the day in warehouses, and at night I went to school, so a lot of the time while I was on campus, it was dark already. And it always seemed like it was winter, whether it was summer, fall, or winter, it was always winter to me because it was cold and dark. And again, being a non-traditional student, it was advantageous for me, because where else could you balance working full-time in a warehouse and going to school full-time during the evening hours, other than somebody like YSU, who would offer you courses in your major during the evening hours.

D: What would you say the area around the campus was like then? And could you compare it from then to now?

RB: Well, the campus, it seemed a lot more dangerous – then again because I was there at night. Actually I was just married, and my wife was going to school at night there, and I was always very concerned about her walking to campus during that time because of crime. Not that crime ever affected me at Youngstown State, because it never did, but I was always wary of it, it was in Youngstown back in the eighties, and it was a time when there was a lot of shootings back in the eighties, we were murder town U.S.A. We were

competing with some of the most populous cities in the country with the number of murders that we had, and not that it was on campus, because it wasn't, but it was always on your mind that there were a lot of murders out there. So it was a time where people were always very careful. Now crime is not as prevalent as it had been, probably due to the lack in population that we have in Youngstown now versus what we had back in the eighties and nineties, we're down a tremendous amount of people living within the city of Youngstown, so crime is not as prevalent. So the perception is that it's a lot safer, and in addition, you know, when I get down towards the University, it seems like it's more lighted, probably because I'm there during the day and not the night.

D: That sun has an effect on people! (Laughter)

RB: And it seems like a very pleasant and friendly atmosphere, the new buildings are beautiful, and the campus has extended itself past the perimeters that it had back when I went there.

D: So obviously you were a commuter, but do you know what kind of housing was available for students if that was an option?

RB: You know, I had some friends that played football, they had stayed on campus, and I visited those dorms, and they were nice, but there was a limited amount of dorms during that period of time, I mean very limited, housing in the area was low-income housing, it was a dangerous area, I didn't want to live there, and I didn't. But, you know, again, commuting into Youngstown, you can get anywhere in Youngstown within 15 or 20 minutes, so it wasn't difficult to be a commuter at Youngstown State University. And now there's housing all over the place for students, and it looks absolutely gorgeous.

D: Since you did commute, how did you feel the parking situation was?

RB: Parking was horrible, it was always horrible, every semester I had at least one or two tickets because I didn't have my card, or I was running a little bit late from work, and I had to park on the street, you know, and you would receive a ticket for parking illegally, but I always filed grievances on the tickets I received, and I always got out of them, I got out the tickets because I would file a grievance, and write it up, and I would give some lame excuse, and evidently some grievance panel heard the grievance and would allow the grievance to be upheld. So I don't think I ever paid a ticket there, but I got several of them. Know the law, make it work.

D: Where did you buy your books from?

RB: You know what? I always bought my books from the Campus Book and Supply.

D: Where they expensive? Or being that you did get a Pell Grant, did they help de-price some of the cost of your books?

RB: I always bought used books, always trying to cut costs wherever I could because I was living out on my own, and that Pell Grant? You know, they would give me a check for the Pell Grant, I could spend that on anything, sometimes it went to books and sometimes it didn't, I mean I always bought the books that I needed for class, but sometimes the Pell Grant or sometimes the loans that I received, the student loans, weren't necessarily to pay for my tuition totally; that money went to health, to pay for food, whatever else I needed to sustain.

D: Did you notice any particular traditions that were being observed at YSU that a lot of students took part in?

RB: Well, there was a lot of students taking part in a lot of things, but again, I was a non-traditional student, and at the time I was working pretty much full-time and going to school full-time, and in the in-between somewhere there I bought a house and was working on that, and I was married and doing other things. So I was truly a non-traditional student.

D: Were you ever like really interested in the issues presented by The Jambar, the student newspaper?

RB: No, I really didn't pay a whole lot of attention to The Jambar, I didn't have the time. I knew that there was a grievance procedure though, and I paid attention to that.

D: Okay, who would you say would be the most memorable instructor you had at Youngstown State?

RB: That was defiantly Dr. John Russo, who is still there at the University. It was my first year at Youngstown State while I was still living at home, and was more of a traditional student, I took Introduction to Organized Labor, and I fell in love with the labor movement, and what the fights of the labor movement had been in the past, and wanted to continue to fight going forward. And so that was it, I took that Intro to Organized Labor class, and I was an undeclared major at that point in time, and it got me leaning in that direction.

D: When you graduated did you attend your graduation ceremony?

RB: Not with my first degree, and the reason why I didn't was because I was proud that had a degree, but I knew that I was going to continue on, and it was like why go and participate in this ceremony, when the very following week I'm going to start a new semester, or new quarter, and it wasn't final, so I really didn't participate in that first one because I knew I was going to continue on, so I held off. I knew I was going to graduate someday and I wanted to walk, but I wanted to walk when I was completed.

D: Okay, can you tell me about the work that you're doing now? And how much impact did your education at YSU have in what you're doing today?

RB: Well, I work for the Teamsters Union now, I'm the Secretary-Treasurer of the local, so obviously the Introduction to Organized Labor Class led me to the path of the Teamsters Union and into the position that I am. I had classes like Organizing, Contract Administration, Labor History, all those classes helped me to be prepared for the job that I do today. And they were extremely useful; when I first got on the job as a member of the Teamsters Union, not everybody was the nicest person in the world, and they kind of threw me to the wolves, go and negotiate that contract, and if I wouldn't have had the experience that I had at Youngstown State University, those classes with Dr. Russo, I would have truly been in a pickle, but I got in there and got right at it.

D: Okay, can you tell me a little about other things about yourself now? Family now? Life now?

RB: Yea, sure, well, like I said I'm working on my Master's Degree in Labor Studies actually, back to the first degree, at the University of Massachusetts, and it's a program that is only for labor activists from anywhere across the country, and there's about 110 students in the program from all over the United States, and it's great. And the reason that I lead with that is because I don't think I would be going to Massachusetts to get my degree working on that kind of program if I didn't have support at home, and I'm married to my wife of twelve years, Mary Katherine, who is an instructor at Youngstown State University in the Communications Department. We have a five year old son, Zachery, who is five handfuls, here today somewhere destroying something. And you know, just a great family, I'm very happy with the way my life has turned out thus far.

D: Anything else you would like to add to this?

RB: This is a quick interview baby!

D: You like that don't you?

RB: All that I have to add is that Youngstown State was truly a stepping stone to get me on to the right track for my career, I have an interesting job now that just becomes more and more interesting every year, there's always a challenge out there. It's an elected position, so I've got to play the politics so that I can become re-elected every three years, this is one of those three years by the way, an election year, I've won the last four elections that I participated in, and hopefully I'll be successful again this year, I think that all happens because of the training that I've received over the years, and the fact that, you know, my upbringing through my father showed me the importance of education – but just education, a balance of education and common sense, and just testinal fortitude. It's gotten me through, and its nice living in Youngstown where my whole family is, so there's that support unit out there also whenever I need them, so it all came together quite nicely.

D: And your favorite niece is in Youngstown.

RB: Absolutely.

D: Thank you very much for your time.

RB: You're welcome.