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# connections

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Union President Finds New Passion

# Morty Bahr's Second Act



by Hope Ferguson

**“I have found another passion,”** says Morty Bahr ’83, ’95 president emeritus of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), as he steers his comfortable Lincoln through streets lined with elegant townhouses and small boutique businesses on a beautiful, late spring day. We are headed to Johnson Towers, located on Upshur Street in Northwest Washington, to see an apartment complex run by the Elderly Housing Development and Operations Corp. (EHDOC), a nonprofit organization that provides housing for low-income seniors. As we turn into the drive, Bahr comments, “You would never know that poor people live here.”



PHOTO: JAY MALLIN PHOTOS

For the past few years, Bahr has been president of the organization that shelters upwards of 5,000 seniors, 80 percent of whom are widowed, and others who are indigent. All have Social Security of \$750 a month or less and pay no more than 30 percent of their monthly income in rent. The building we're visiting is just one in a network of 53 facilities in 14 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

Bahr warmly greets a tall, lean elderly man in a mechanized wheelchair in the lobby, and exchanges pleasantries with Celia Kendall, the housing development's manager. In a government-labor collaboration, the buildings are largely funded by the Department of Housing and Urban



Above: Bahr addresses a rally in front of the Verizon building in Manhattan in support of ongoing collective bargaining.

Right: Bahr testifies before the House Education and Labor Committee on behalf of adult literacy programs.



PHOTOS: COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA (CWA)

Development, but Bahr is particularly pleased that they are built, operated and supported by organized labor, under the umbrella of the AFL-CIO, which founded the organization (under another name) in 1978.

### A Union Man

Bahr is a committed union man. He rose from the ranks of radio and telegraph workers after World War II, to become one of the most powerful labor leaders and power brokers in the world. In 1985, he became president of the 700,000 strong Communications Workers of America, representing both private and public sector workers in telecommunications, broadcasting, cable TV, journalism, publishing, manufacturing, airlines, customer service, government service, health care, education and other fields. He peppers his talk with anecdotes about former Dept. of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, House of Representatives Majority Leader and Maryland Rep. Steny Hoyer, former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo and his dear friend Ted Kennedy, who was the first to call him when he was elected president of CWA. Kennedy joked that he was "ticked" (although he

used a more colorful word) because Bahr had gotten to be president before he did.

When Bahr retired in 2005, among the speakers who feted him were former President Bill Clinton and the late Senator Kennedy.

For all of his hob-nobbing in the halls of power, Bahr remains a humble man with an unwavering commitment to working people, says his son, Dan, who himself was Long Island director of the New York United Teachers before he retired last year.

"He is an incredibly committed man to the things he believes in. He is dedicated to making the lives of working people better, and this came through with everything he did," says Dan, who remembers nights stuffing envelopes, doing the union "grunt work."

Senator Charles E. Schumer (D – New York) who has known Bahr since the 1960s concurs: "As a guy who handed out leaflets on the street corners of Brooklyn with him, I can tell you that Morty Bahr knows that democracy is not a free ride, and that the health of our communities – and, ultimately our economy and our nation – is directly related to our ability to educate every member of this society to their

fullest potential. Morty's legacy is in the doing: as a labor leader, he was ferociously committed to economic justice and workplace democracy, and as an educator he was a groundbreaking champion of lifelong learning. It is a rare and extraordinary legacy that has improved the lives of countless people."

For today's trip to Johnson Towers apartment complex, Bahr is wearing a buff-colored shirt and matching work pants – the kind of outfit worn by farmers and maintenance men – under a navy blazer. He's a vital, unpretentious man who seems far younger than his 83 years.

Celia Kendall, the development manager, takes us up in the elevator to the door of Maude Tucker, a retired caretaker from Chevy Chase, Md. Tucker



PHOTO: JAY MALIN PHOTOS

Maude Tucker shows Bahr medication she takes because of hip surgery.

sits in her spotless kitchen surrounded by groceries and an open Bible. In the living room, a pink couch, matching armchairs and a coffee table are arranged atop a sea-foam green Oriental carpet. Throughout the bright apartment on nearly every available space are photos of her four children, 12 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

Bahr and Tucker settle on the couch and commiserate about ailing hips (Tucker's total hip replacement, and

Bahr's wife Florence's fractured hip from a fall).

After she was widowed, Tucker, who uses a walker, needed to downsize and sell the house she owned with her late husband.

So how does she like her new space? "Oh, I love it, I love it, it's wonderful," she exclaims. When asked what specifically she loves about the apartment, she replies, "Everything! My hat's off to the front office. Whenever you tell them you need something, they get right on it; trying to better our conditions. They help us get in and out if we have a handicap, and knock on our doors to see if we're okay."

This testimony clearly warms the heart of Morty Bahr. He earlier had told me how one 94-year-old woman took

both his hands in hers and told him, "I am so blessed to be here." When an apartment becomes vacant, or a new complex goes up, there are lines stretching around the block, and some seniors camp out overnight, just to get an application. The need will get only more dire as baby boomers retire. It is projected that at least one-third of

them – many former union members – will need housing assistance in the future. It is clear that Bahr sees this work as a continuation of his life's calling: the dignity of workers extended to their retirement years.

### Bahr's Early Years

Bahr was born in Brooklyn, in 1926, the middle son of Jewish immigrants from Russia. When he was an infant his family relocated to the Bronx. His

father was a small businessman who was frequently on the road looking for work; his mother a homemaker. "I grew up during the Depression," Bahr reminisces while seated in his elegant apartment in the exclusive Woodley Park neighborhood in the nation's capital. "We didn't know we were poor, since everyone around us was in the same situation."

In 1938, the family moved to the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. He went to junior high school in what he terms the heart of the African-American ghetto.

"But we didn't grow up discriminating. We didn't know anything about that. Our building in the Bronx was a melting pot with tenants of many religions from many countries residing there."

After graduating from junior high, he attended Tilden High School in East Flatbush. A bright student, he finished two years ahead of schedule, graduating one month before his 16th birthday and entering Brooklyn College. After one year, during which he played catcher on the college baseball team (and got a single off the future great Brooklyn Dodger pitcher Ralph Branca), he took a leave of absence. Being younger than the other students was a significant factor in the decision.

### War Experiences

The nation was deeply involved in World War II and Bahr knew that in a year he would be drafted. He decided he would rather serve as a radio officer in the U. S. Merchant Marine, so he enrolled in a school operated by the U.S. Coast Guard in Manhattan, which was training men to be qualified to serve as radio officers. After receiving his FCC 2nd Class radiotelegraph license, Bahr joined the American Communications Association, Local 2 and was assigned to a ship with the rank of ensign.

"In fact," he recalls, "I was in uniform when I registered for the draft. My first ship was the S.S. Thorstein Veblen. After

several days at sea, the chief mate invited all the officers, other mates, engineers and the radio officers, to his cabin to discuss the recent results of collective bargaining,” Bahr recalls.

“Suddenly, there was a loud thud and the door flew open. It was the captain, in a drunken rage, yelling, ‘There will be no union talk aboard my vessel!’ It didn’t seem to matter that he was a member of the Masters, Mates and Pilots Union.”

However, the captain’s predilection for drink later determined Bahr’s fate.

The Veblen and five other vessels, along with the French First Army, were involved in the invasion of Southern France after D Day. The carnage that had taken place in Toulon, where the French scuttled their fleet to keep the warships from falling into German hands, was everywhere. But the captain had gone ashore. Later that day, a Navy commander boarded the vessel and advised the chief mate that Bahr’s ship and five others would leave at daybreak for Port de Bouc, where the U. S. was building an air field. As day faded into night, the captain still had not returned. The chief mate was ordered to take the vessel out. He refused, contending he couldn’t accept that responsibility as his previous ship had been a sailing vessel.

At daylight the other five ships departed. Shortly afterward, the men aboard the Veblan got word: all five ships were sunk by German U-boats and all onboard were lost. “To this day,” Bahr says, “I just can’t help but ask, ‘why not me?’”

## Union Ascension

Two months shy of his 19th birthday, Bahr married Florence Slobodow, a pretty dark-haired teenager who also was the daughter of immigrants. The two met on a blind date on June 10, 1943. For him it was love at first sight.

Florence was more circumspect. “He seemed like a nice enough boy,” Florence recalls. She’d grown up with four brothers, so was immediately

comfortable with him. But what sealed the deal was that he recognized a reproduction of a French Impressionist painting that hung in the movie house lobby.

“I said, ‘he likes art? I can like this boy.’”

“That was the only one I knew!” Bahr chuckles.

The Bahrs ended up eloping.

“Florence has been a tremendous asset during my presidential years,” Bahr says. “I wanted the feeling that we were truly family. Her presence at a lot of places I went helped. Sometimes I think I got elected because of her!”

Not long after VE Day, his ship sailed for Marseille, commandeered to bring U. S. Army armaments from France to Germany to be used in the occupation. “The day before we left Marseille, I spoke to Florence on the phone. She was pregnant and was told it would still be a month before she gave birth. About a week later, while in the Bay of Biscay, I decided to call the Mackay Radio ship to shore station – just to say hello. When the operator told me he had a message for me, I froze as he transmitted the radiogram: I had a son. Two days later, after the booze ran out, I asked for a repetition so I could type up an actual copy.” The Bahrs later added a daughter, Janice, to the family.

When Bahr got home, his son Dan was six weeks old. He told Florence that he would make one last voyage so that they could save some money.

“She didn’t object. She simply said ‘Go ahead, but don’t bother coming back. We won’t be here.’” When he protested that that was all he knew how to do, Florence was ready. “She handed me a handful of help-wanted ads from the various telegraph companies, all of which were expanding after the war. On March 9, 1947, I was hired by Mackay



Florence and Morty Bahr toast at an Empire State College Foundation Board dinner, 2009

PHOTO: STOCKSTUDIOPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Radio and Telegraph Company – a move that dramatically changed our lives.”

He became a member of the American Communications Association (ACA), the same union that had represented him as a merchant marine, but a different local, No. 10. Fearing the strength of the union, the company decided to “take us on when the contract expired Dec. 31, 1947,” Bahr recalls.

Earlier in 1947, Congress had passed the Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman’s veto, which required that all union leaders sign a noncommunist affidavit. The leadership of the ACA had for a long time been communist dominated. The strike began at midnight Dec. 31, 1947. About six weeks into the strike the company filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to decertify the union – alleging that the union no longer represented a majority of the employees. Since the leaders of the ACA refused to sign the affidavit even during the strike, the union could not appear on the NLRB ballot. Thus, no election could be held and the union was decertified. However, the workers were united and stayed out another six weeks until they decided to go back – but it was on the company’s terms.

Bahr’s metamorphosis from union member to union advocate started the moment the workers conceded. They were ordered to get into a long, snaking



line in the lobby of the building and were told, “Don’t call us, we *may* call you.”

“That,” Bahr says, “was the first indignity of many to come that changed me into a union man and helped me recognize the role a union plays to bring justice, equity and respect to the workplace.”

During the period after the strike, workers quickly witnessed the excesses of an unfettered management – such as sending someone out to workers’ homes to check on them when they were out sick. Wages were frozen for a time.

In 1950, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) was organizing employees of the Western Union Telegraph Co. a block away from Mackay Radio. The organizer was invited to visit the workers who by this time were working for the American Cable and Radio Corp., a merger of Mackay Radio with two other subsidiaries. Bahr quickly became a member of the organizing committee for CWA. By this time, ACA leaders had signed the affidavit following their expulsion from the CIO for allegedly being communist dominated. American Communications Association, too, began organizing. A third union, the Commercial Telegraphers Union (AFL) showed up. Heated organizing took place among the three unions and Bahr had become a recognized leader of the CWA group.

In 1954, the National Labor Relations Board conducted an election with all three unions on the ballot. On a second balloting between CWA and ACA, CWA won. In April 1954 a mass meeting was held to elect temporary officers. Bahr, though not an announced candidate, was elected unanimously and was the first president of CWA, Local 1172.

In October, Bahr was re-elected as permanent local president for a two-year term. He was re-elected twice. In 1958, however, he took a leave of absence from the company and resigned as

local president when the national union asked him to join the temporary staff to organize the 18,000 New York Telephone Co. plant workers in downstate New York.

“Frankly, I was astonished. I didn’t know that the top officers of the union were even aware of me and what I was doing,” says Bahr. “And, all I knew about a telephone was how to dial!”

Communications Workers of America won the election in February 1961 – one of the largest elections won by a union in many years. His status was immediately changed to permanent staff and shortly thereafter, following another win of 6,000 New York Telephone workers in upstate New York, Bahr was named New York director, a newly created position. In 1963, he became assistant to the vice president of District 1, covering New York, New Jersey and the five New England states. In 1969, he was elected vice president of that district. During the time he led CWA District 1, the membership more than doubled.

In 1985, after the surprise retirement of President Glenn Watts a year before his term ended, Bahr was elected president of the national union by acclamation.

Clearly, Bahr’s power of persuasion and his consensus-building skills had served him well.

### The Education Union

During his tenure as president of CWA, Morty Bahr was determined to make CWA “the education union.”

The Bell system had been forced to break up in 1984, as a result of an antitrust lawsuit filed by the Reagan Justice Department. In addition to breaking the monopoly, what was formerly an American industry now was opened to global competition. Deregulation, globalization and the speed of technological change created a perfect storm for telephone workers.

“Historically, a high school grad, or even dropout, could apply for a job at the local telephone company and live a pretty good middle-class life, with retirement after 30 years, a pension and health care. Now, they don’t have that kind of security. What we needed to do was to come up with language of employment security. The only way to ensure jobs is to educate the worker to be more marketable.”

Ray Williams, the vice president of labor relations at American Telephone & Telegraph (AT&T) and Bahr entered discussions in the fall of 1984 about what could be done to further the education of telephone workers. Borrowing from a UAW/Ford program, and “stealing” one of the executives of that program, the Alliance for Employee Growth and Development was born as a nonprofit union-funded corporation.

To this day, the education a worker receives does not have to be job related. “Over the years we had to put a few caps on it,” acknowledges Bahr. “We found out some people were going to school to be helicopter pilots and were using part of their tuition to pay for helicopters!”

Since implementation of the program, Bahr says he has attended “dozens and dozens” of graduations. “There had been a myth in corporate America that if I offered free education and training to my employees, they would leave as soon as they got what they wanted. But when I went to graduations, and the graduate spoke, it always went like this: ‘I want to thank the company and union for making this possible. I hope I can finish my career with this company but most importantly, I am in charge of my life.’” He says that even today, during heated contract negotiations, the Alliance program is never held hostage by either side. “For both labor and management, it’s a win-win.”

Following the success of the Alliance, CWA negotiated various company-paid

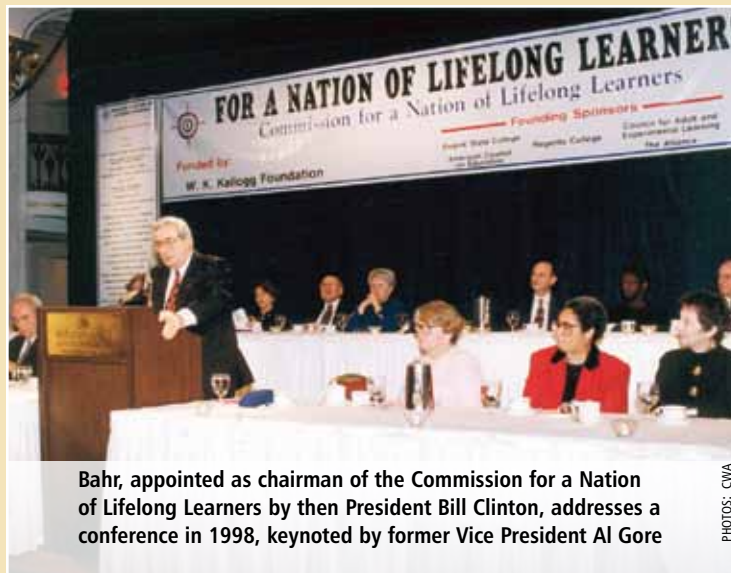
**“Morty’s legacy is in the doing: as a labor leader, he was ferociously committed to economic justice and workplace democracy, and as an educator he was a groundbreaking champion of lifelong learning.”** – Senator Charles E. Schumer

education programs with all of the major telephone companies. In 1994, CWA and Verizon negotiated the Next Step Program where employees worked four days a week and went to a community college the fifth day, receiving a full week’s wage.

“Technology and competition would virtually eliminate the need for thousands of telephone operators. We needed to persuade them to use the tools we negotiated to save their jobs,” Bahr says. “I remember in about 2003 traveling to Albuquerque to speak at our annual meeting of telephone operator activists from all the various telephone companies. I got their attention when I said that other than a few who are about to retire, none would retire as operators. I then reviewed all the various education programs we had negotiated with their companies and virtually pleaded with them to take advantage of them ... that there was no reason for them to be in a dead-end job. Thankfully, hundreds, if not thousands, of these women, mostly minority and single heads of households, took advantage of what their union negotiated and moved into higher paying and more secure technical positions,” says Bahr, with obvious pride.

### Giving Back

Morty Bahr graduated in 1983 as one of the first class of union members at what is now The Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies. He is rightfully proud that he received two years of prior-learning credit, and maintained a 4.0 grade point average for the two years he needed to complete his bachelor’s degree. In 1995, upon nomination by SUNY Empire State College, Bahr was



**Bahr, appointed as chairman of the Commission for a Nation of Lifelong Learners by then President Bill Clinton, addresses a conference in 1998, keynoted by former Vice President Al Gore**

PHOTOS: CWA

awarded an honorary doctorate by the State University of New York. He continues to give back to others what has been so important to him and what he made a priority as president of CWA – the opportunity for an education. In 2005, around the time he retired, he was speaking with Hugh Hammett, then the vice president for external affairs, and now the college’s interim provost and vice president for academic affairs, about how he could get more involved with the college. Until then, he said he hadn’t been active in alumni affairs, but Hammett knew of his interest in education and his fundraising prowess with corporations. He helped Bahr set up a scholarship program in Bahr’s name directed at union members and their families. A few years later, Bahr became a member of the college’s foundation board.

Bahr was especially gratified when he spoke at the college’s Center for Distance Learning graduation in 2006, and afterwards, was invited to a brunch where he met many of the Bahr scholars from all over the nation. One woman introduced herself, hugged Bahr, and then told him what a difference the scholarship had made in her life. She

had been unemployed, her husband, a carpenter, had an on-the-job accident and was totally disabled (and later would need a heart transplant). She wanted to become a school teacher and move to Florida where the climate would be better for her husband. Bahr assured her that he knew exactly who she was as he reads all the applications for the Bahr scholarships.

“She said: ‘Well, I want you to know that I am now a kindergarten teacher in Florida.’ To put a real happy ending on this story, her husband had a successful heart transplant and last year she was named the most outstanding teacher in the Tampa school district.”

For all this, at this moment in time, it is the elderly housing initiative to which Bahr devotes much of his seemingly boundless energy. It is his goal to open even more units across the country to accommodate the demand and to make sure that the complexes are built in accordance with the highest building standards.

He says were it not for initiatives such as this, many of the current residents would be “homeless, dead, living in uninhabitable places, or, if they’re lucky, living with relatives who want to get rid of them. We are enabling people with virtually no financial means to live independently well into their 90s. What we are providing is dignity in retirement. You can’t have dignity if you don’t have a roof over your head. So, it’s a continuation of what I’ve been doing all my life. I can’t think of anything better I can do than use my golden years to make someone else’s a little more golden.” ■