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Bernardi: Persistence and passion embodied

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer

VAN NUYS - Compassionate and cantankerous, former City Councilman Ernani Bernardi was remembered Tuesday as a generous advocate for the San Fernando Valley for 32 years.

"I didn't know him as well as many of you here," Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa told 200 mourners at the funeral held at St. Elisabeth's Church for Bernardi, who died last week at 94. "But, I knew him as a man who spoke for the common man, a public official who truly cared about the people he represented.

"He taught a lesson all of us in public service should live by."

Bernardi began his City Council service in 1961 and was rarely challenged in a career that spanned the major growth period of Los Angeles.

"This is one death that really hit me hard," said former Councilwoman Ruth Galanter. "Ernie Bernardi was like a father to me. After he left, I tried to follow his example and question what we were doing and ask why we were doing things the way we were."

Assemblyman Mark Ridley-Thomas, D-Los Angeles, who served with Bernardi and had a brief dust-up with him when he first came into office, said he grew to respect Bernardi.

"Our problems lasted all of about 15 seconds," Ridley-Thomas said. "He apologized, I apologized, and we worked well together. The thing I remember is that he never said anything bad about anyone.

"During one debate, he stopped himself and said to a member, 'I'm going to sit down now and not say anything that will embarrass both of us.' That was Ernie Bernardi."

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, a former councilman who served for years with Bernardi, also considered him a father figure.

"On his last day in office, I sent him a note saying he meant as much to me as my father and I wanted to thank him." Yaroslavsky said. "He came over to me afterward and said it was the nicest thing that ever happened to him in the City Council."

Bernardi's political career was actually the third of his life.

The son of Italian immigrants, he was born Oct. 29, 1911, in Standard, Ill., and was raised by his father, two grandmothers, an aunt and an uncle. His father was a music teacher who taught his son to play woodwind instruments - a talent that served him well.

Bernardi was forced to leave the University of Detroit, where he was studying journalism, because of the Great Depression, but his musical talent took him to a life as a professional musician.

He played saxophone with several big bands, including Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Bob Crosby, until he decided in the 1940s to settle in Van Nuys. There, he and his wife, Lucille, had four children, and he embarked on a new career as a home builder.

Bernardi ran for City Council in 1957, losing to then-Councilman James Corman. After Corman went on to Congress, Bernardi won his seat on the council representing Van Nuys.

It was a different city then, still glowing in the post-war boom, when the biggest debates were over completing the Ventura (101) Freeway and what the city should be doing to encourage growth.

Bernardi came to the council as a cautious naysayer, warning against unlimited growth and railing against the influence of campaign contributions. He later introduced what became the first voter-approved campaign spending limits in a major jurisdiction.

He also battled the Community Redevelopment Agency, pushing through a lawsuit that limited how much could be diverted from its downtown project area into housing and other programs.

Over the years, he saw his district change from a majority Anglo to primarily Latino, and he taught himself Spanish so he could communicate with his new constituents.

Bernardi also was an outspoken advocate for better treatment of the homeless, leading efforts that former Mayor Tom Bradley adopted to create a cold-weather shelter program.

Over the years, he ran unsuccessfully for the county Board of Supervisors and mayor - touring the city in a bright red double-decker bus that blared big band music.

After he left office, he remained in touch with various officials. He also attended daily services at St. Elisabeth's and worked on an album and documentary of the big band era.

Bernardi is survived by his second wife, Eve; sons John and James, daughters Joanne Kent and Judith McRae; seven grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

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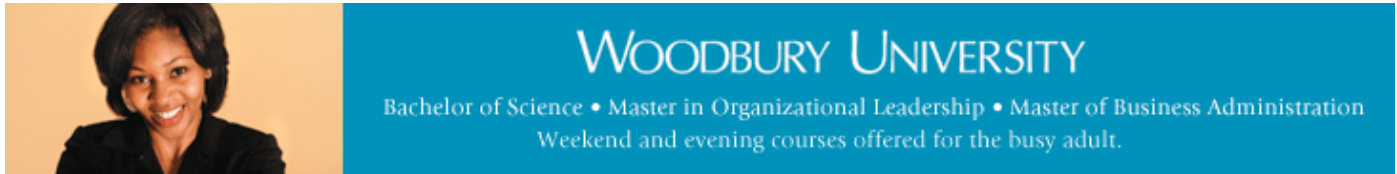
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