



## Carl's Junior

**W**hen I attended my first NALC training 30 years ago, I was a brand-new shop steward who knew very little about anything. As far as I could tell, no one from my little branch of 60 members had been to any kind of training or attended a state or national convention, at least not in recent memory. But I'd convinced my branch that if they wanted me to be the steward, I needed to be trained. And that is how I found myself standing outside of the Western Airlines baggage claim area at the Salt Lake City airport in May 1982 wondering how I was going to get to the hotel where the Region 2 rap session was happening.

I looked around and thought there might be some other letter carriers going to the training and maybe I could catch a ride. It was then that I saw these two fellows who appeared to be around my father's age, standing nearby. For some reason I thought they looked like they could be letter carriers, so I sidled over to where they were standing. When I overheard them use some postal

**"I didn't know it at the time, but the act of going up to those two men changed my life."**

jargon, I asked them if they were going to the NALC training and, sure enough, they were.

Looking back over my life, I can recognize certain events I experienced or decisions I made that had a profound impact in the direction my life took. You know what I mean: Had I not done this or not said that, things would have turned out very differently. And this moment outside the airport terminal was one of those. Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but the act of going up to those two men changed my life.

I soon discovered that one guy was Carl Benson and he was the president of Tacoma, WA Branch 130, which was only about 20 miles from my branch in Kent. The other fellow was Len Mountain, the branch secretary. They were waiting for a taxi and Carl invited me to join them on the ride to the hotel, so I hopped in. And for the next five years or so, Carl wouldn't leave me alone. Nor I, him. He stuck to me like glue at the rap session, introduced me

around to the other union activists from our region, made sure I was involved in every activity, and even arranged for me to go to dinner with our National Business Agent Jim Edgemon.

After that weekend, Carl invited me to come to one of his branch meetings so I could see what running a branch meeting was all about. I took him up on his offer the following month and for every month for about the next four years. Carl made sure that I was included in everything his branch did and helped me in any way he could, whether it was dealing with postal managers, my own branch, or my family life. By going to those meetings, I met several other "elder statesmen" in Branch 130 who also had a profound influence in my life and in my union career as well, men such as Bob Muntz, Stan Sandstrom, Jerry Bock and Francis Devine. The branch received me with open arms and I never once heard or felt like anyone was wondering, "What is *he* doing here?"

A strong family man, Carl made sure I understood the importance of including my own family in union activities as much as possible, inviting us over for Sunday dinners at his home or out at a restaurant, and to Branch 130 picnics, installation dinners and other outings. I'd not come from a union family, so this was a whole new world to me, and Carl was there every step of the way. When I attended my first national convention in San Francisco in August 1982, Carl included me in Branch 130's room block and he and the other Tacoma delegates helped me navigate my way through that whole experience. When I first ran for state office in 1983, at his prodding, and lost by two votes, Carl was there to console and encourage me. When I was elected the state director of education three years later, Carl was there to congratulate me.

Nowadays, we call what Carl did mentoring: "A developmental, caring, sharing and helping relationship where one person invests time, know-how and effort in enhancing another person's growth, knowledge and skills and responds to critical needs in the life of that person in ways that prepare the individual for greater productivity or achievement in the future." Back then, it was just what good union leaders did. It still is. ☒