

# The loss of a giant and a mentor



**Fredric V. Rolando**

**I**t is a strange experience when a phone call you've been anticipating for days turns out to be a quite different call—one you've been dreading for months. That happened to me on Jan. 10. As I waited the results of our interest arbitration, I received news that President Emeritus Vince Sombrotto had passed away in New York.

A giant of the American labor movement, and the animating spirit of the NALC for the past 40-plus years, has died. Our union has lost its greatest leader and I have lost the best mentor I have ever had.

**Vince had been ailing for** some time, which prevented him from attending the Min-

neapolis Convention last summer—much to his bitter disappointment and utter dismay. But he never lost his passion for life or his unwavering commitment to the members of the NALC. And he served his fellow letter carriers to the end, offering me advice and encouragement over the past year as we fought for a new contract in the most trying of circumstances.

Final word on the conclusion of more than a year of collective bargaining and the completion of the interest arbitration process soon followed the call I dreaded from New York. That news is covered in this issue of the magazine and will be the subject of a national rap session later this month in Las Vegas (see page 4).

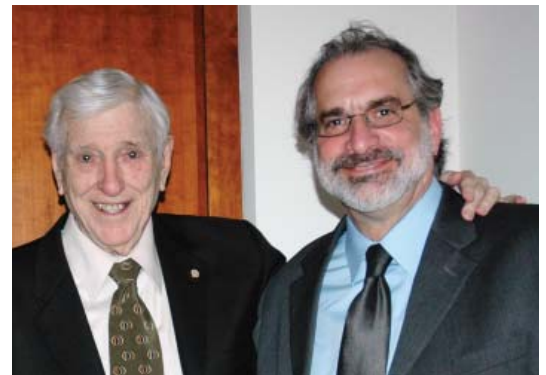
But here I must express the sadness we all feel over the loss of Brother Sombrotto, a sensation that mixes with feelings of gratitude and love to create a most bittersweet cocktail of emotions. For me and most other letter carriers of my generation, Vince was the most natural leader we've ever known. But more than that, he was a role model who challenged all of us to contribute to the cause of letter carriers and other working people. He made us all proud to be letter carriers and trade unionists. More than all his achievements over his extraordinary career, this gift of dignity and pride is what I appreciate the most.

**But we should not forget his achievements. I have said** over the years that the Great Postal Strike of 1970 did more good for more working people and their families than perhaps any other strike in history—with the possible exceptions of the autoworkers' Flint sit-down strike of the late 1930s and the Polish Solidarity strike of 1980. The lives of hundreds of thousands of postal workers were transformed, including

every current and future member of our union and every other postal union. But Vince didn't stop there. He went on to lead the national union for 24 extraordinary years, building on the contributions of generations of letter carriers who built our union and increasing its power and effectiveness.

I am truly humbled to be part of a very small club of 18 letter carriers who have served as president of our union. During my time as national president, I have been blessed to have the friendship and support of three former presidents—Vince, Bill Young and Jim Rademacher. With Vince's passing, the club of living past presidents has shrunk to two.

**On a poignant day like Jan. 10, I couldn't help but think back** to that amazing day in Boston in 2008 when President Young welcomed both Vince and Jim to the stage at the Boston convention where the delegates voted to officially name the NALC Headquarters the Vincent R. Sombrotto Building. We all got to meet Vince's extraordinary wife, Rae, and their family that day and we cried along with Vince when he expressed his love for letter carriers even as he acknowledged the family time he sacrificed to serve all of us. It gives me great comfort to know that Vince recovered a portion of that lost time and had 10 great years after his retirement to enjoy the love and company of Rae and their seven children and 14 grandchildren, who have stayed close to their New York home.



**Vince and me in 2010**

I know this to be true because just about every time I spoke to Vince on the phone in recent years I could hear the sounds of a home bustling with grandchildren in the background. Those conversations were invaluable to me for the advice, historical memory and support Vince gave me. He often told me that our long discussions about the labor movement, politics, and even sports made him feel like he was back in the swing room with the carriers he loved so much. I will miss him very much, and I know all of you will as well.

Vince's death reminds us all that sooner or later our bodies will fail us, but his life should teach us all that the spirit for life, justice and solidarity will never die as long as we have each other and our union to give us strength. God bless Vince Sombrotto and God bless the NALC.