

Still Crazy (About Being Partners) After All These Years

Phil Goldsmith and Debra Kahn 23 January 2013

PG: Thirty-three years ago a young woman—she was 26 at the time, I was 33—walked into the campaign headquarters of former six-term congressman William J. Green, who was running for Mayor in 1979. I was director of communications and issues for the campaign. I had just left the editorial board of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and was overwhelmed with my new responsibilities. It was on a dreary Saturday when Debra Amper (now Kahn) appeared in my office offering to volunteer in the campaign. I brusquely told her to bring me a writing sample the following weekend. A week later, she reappeared with several writing samples. She seemed pleasant enough, certainly very bright, had governmental experience and could write clearly and concisely.

She could make my life a lot easier and make me look good in the process, I thought to myself, quickly offering her a job, a decision I benefited from for the next several decades of my life.

DK: Of course I remember some of the details differently. For starters, I was still 25. It was a Friday in March. And

yes, Phil seemed overwhelmed, sitting behind a desk piled high and wide with papers. (My own would come to look like that in short order.) He barely looked up as I stood in the doorway, directed by the campaign manager to introduce myself. "What do you know about healthcare?" he barked. "Everything," I replied, by which I meant it was the only subject about which I knew anything, due to my job in the New Jersey Division of Medical Assistance. "Fix this," he demanded, tossing a half-baked position paper about the city's Family Medical Centers. So fix it I did, and passed the first Goldsmith test.

I liked Phil immediately for his humor and his knowledge and how he would analyze an issue from angles different than anyone else. I was also intimidated by his talent and intensity. But I took those qualities as challenges to understand him better and do better work than I ever thought possible. Mostly, I appreciated that he was a stand-up guy who kept his word, his values and his integrity. His acceptance of me meant that as a newcomer, I was accepted by others. Still, I could not possibly know then how lucky and life-defining that first encounter would be.

What subsequent partnerships have you undertaken?

PG: When Green was elected, I became Deputy Mayor for Policy and Planning and Debbie joined us in the mayor's office.

I eventually joined PNC Bank, responsible for consumer banking as well as community, civic and government relations. I persuaded Debbie to join my staff. She did and among other things, helped to lay the groundwork that today has made PNC a major civic and community partner in the Delaware Valley.

We both eventually left PNC but our friendship and partnership continued. I went into executive recruiting and one of my clients was Temple University. Temple President Peter Liacouras was looking for a special assistant and I knew the perfect person. I sent Debbie to Liacouras for an interview; he saw what I had been seeing for years and hired her on the spot.

In 2000 our partnership took a new turn. She was Secretary of Education for the City of Philadelphia under Mayor John F. Street. She called me up one day and said she wanted to talk to me about something. We met in Love Park and she told me the administration was looking for an interim chief executive officer for School District. Was I interested? I brushed her off. I was busy preparing for a trip to Cuba with a small group of music students to learn to play the conga drums and other percussion instruments.

A couple of weeks later I was in Havana, sitting in my sweltering hotel room practicing the triangle. I was the oldest one in my traveling party by at least 25 years and each of the others was musically talented. I had two left

hands and was humiliated each day as some of the world's greatest percussion teachers tried— unsuccessfully-- to work with me. As I sat in my hotel room struggling with the triangles my grandchildren could play with ease, I said to myself, "Is there anything I won't try?"

The answer was no. When I returned to Philadelphia my first call was to Debbie. I told her I would consider the CEO position. Debbie and I were partners once again. But with the district being near bankruptcy, engaged in labor strife and soon to be at war with the state over privatization, I can't say she actually made my life easier this time.

I eventually left the district but shortly returned to the administration, first as executive director of Fairmount Park and then as Managing Director. Debbie and I, both serving in the mayor's cabinet, were partners once again.

When I left the Administration in 2005, I formed my own consulting firm. I quickly realized I needed help and she agreed to become my partner, but there was a catch. I could not do anything to embarrass her.

By this time she knew me well enough to know that I am quite capable of acting out and doing silly things. I wasn't sure I could make the commitment, but desperate for her to sign on I acquiesced. I think the only time I came close to violating my pledge was when I put the theme song from

Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* on my cell phone as my ringtone. Every time it rang, I could see Debbie's face grow stern. She would say, "Do you have to?" After the seventh "look" from her I finally removed it, much to her relief.

Debbie was offered a position as executive director of Delaware Valley Grantmakers and like all good things that must come to an end, so did our partnership but never our friendship.

I eventually restored my *Curb Your Enthusiasm* ringtone to my cell phone.

DK: Phil got this sequence right. It's true that the time we worked in our respective school roles was one of our most rewarding, important and memorable— but also the tensest. He sent me flowers the first day on his job—and a sad letter on the last. We both grew as people because of that experience.

Our consulting gig was a real partnership—pretty much up to the two of us to make it work or not. We evolved into our roles, complementing one another (even to the extent that Phil was the early riser and I worked as a night owl) and emphasizing our strengths. Recognizing areas where neither of us had skills, we called in reinforcements! We managed to do some good for our clients, keep our reputations intact and even earn some money.

The ringtone did make me cringe and it was great of Phil

to remove it (especially when it took him so long to conquer the technology). I'm glad he has it back since it obviously amuses him. And he has yet to name a single annoying behavior that I need to ditch.

What advice would you give leaders about spotting and sustaining productive partnerships like this?

PG: Find someone who is bright, shares your values, works hard and you can have fun and laugh with—and of course, make you look good. Liking Larry David is irrelevant.

DK: Prize the partnership. Trust is the key factor. Find a shared sense of purpose, be equal parts reliable cheerleader, constructive critic and constant communicator. As in any relationship, know when to give and when to get. Finally, don't minimize the fun factor; it is the bond that endures and sustains through the rough patches and makes the good ones that much better.

For the record, I really do like Larry David; he acts so much like Phil!