

**Rep. Marcy Kaptur, Member, United States House of Representatives**

*(Unedited Transcript)*

Thank you so very much for the invitation to participate in this magnificent forum, and I just feel very privileged to be here.

I have to perhaps start with this explanation, that I actually was employed by Monsignor Geno Baroni, 0113and I have a lot to say about that -- but I'm still employed by him. And so if you come to my office, his last prayer is on our wall, and I always have his book that Larry O'Rourke, who was up here in the prior panel, anyone that comes to my office, there's the bookcase, and the photo faces out. So every morning I see him first, just, you know, I say, "Okay, Geno, reporting for duty."

And to perhaps begin with the statement that the life of Monsignor Geno Baroni is an unfinished Symphony. That's how I look at it. And I view myself as one of his disciples. Perhaps some of you are, also. And I think of a piece of music I heard at the other day on one of the radio stations: "Ode to the Common Man" -- If Geno were here, he'd say "Ode to the Common Man and Woman" -- and I think of him.

He was the Julia Childs of human development.

(Laughter.)

He was such a social chef. And you think about Julia with her great humor, and all of the action, right? And I saw Joe McNeeley's drawings appear a little bit earlier, and that one, I said, "it's like Joan Miro, the sculptor, who did all of those beautiful mobiles," and one is hanging in the Senate, I believe, in the Hart Building.

And when I think of Geno it was, he was so real but he was so creative. He was hard to capture, it's even hard to talk about him. But he tried to help us make sense and understand who we were as people living in the United States, as Americans.

And he popularized the unpopular notion -- at that time -- of ethnic heritage in human diversity. It was very unpopular to use the word "ethnic" back during the 1960s, because people would take it as a code word for being racist. And yet Geno was trying to establish just another platform for people to see themselves and view themselves in the human diversity that exists in this country, and indeed, around the world.

Today if he were here with us -- and he is with us; I have no doubt about that -- there's a big story in the New York Times on the arts page, the front of the arts page, about a mosaic of Arab culture at home in America, in Dearborn, Michigan; not far from where I live.

And I won't read the whole thing, but I will read just a couple sentences talking about this new \$16 million Arab-American -- the museum, which opened in May and is "like other museums" -- it's interesting the words they use. This author calls it -- "It's like other museums of American hyphenation: at once an assertion of difference and of the longing, a declaration of distinction and of loyalty. Dr. Imiri from the museum explains, 'the museum was built to tell our story. But before we can tell our story, we have to know what the Arab-American story is. People don't know.'"

Very interesting. That's today, 2005. I want to go back to an article I wrote when I was working for Geno directly, in the city of Chicago. And this was published in 1977, and I'll just read you the first paragraph:

"We were working on the near Northwest side of Chicago" -- a community I will revisit again this weekend. I stayed in touch for over 25 years now. What we did worked.

And it talks about what was happening in Chicago then. "East Humboldt Park is a whitespace on either side of the road, in studs Turkel's Division Street, America. This is the Chicago of Gipinsky's drugstore, and Slesak Homemade Sausage, of Ebwin Gusto bakery, and Kaplan's department store; of Erie Street settlement house, Armanetti's liquors, the original Goldblatt's, and Catholic masses in Spanish at St. Boniface Church. This is cultural pluralism in America, at once the bedrock strength and hope of our cities."

I read that -- some of the names have changed if you go to the neighborhood today. But in my closing remarks I'll talk about the plan we put together, which could be applied in any community that is multiethnic, multiracial, diverse in every way. And to hold it up as a model that worked. This is just one, one, dimension of Geno's work.

I, as one of his disciples, am just so grateful that he allowed me to move forward in that effort. And I think my good friend Peter Ujvagi, who's here from the city of Toledo, who first took me with a crowbar and said, "You've got to get out and help him do these development efforts around our country."

I thought I would tell you how I viewed Geno. First of all, I viewed him as a priest. And he accepted and he gave worth to peoples' heritage. He didn't want them to forget it, but to value it, and from it, come to a greater understanding of the lives and struggles of others different from themselves. That's the same sort of effort, if we think about this Arab-American Museum, that this particular ethnic group confronts in our country today.

He was very open to people of different ethnic, racial, gender, lifestyle, and religious traditions. He respected them all. In fact, he had a phrase -- maybe others have used it -- that I say to myself often: "the valued variance of a common humanity, the varied values of a common humanity," I love that expression. He was such a wordsmith.

And those valued variants of a common humanity that lead toward human betterment, toward progress and toward peace.

He recoiled against the concept of America as a melting pot. He flew right into that like an F-16 with bombs on both sides. And he used to have an expression, "They tell us we have to melt or get off the pot. I refuse."

(Laughter.)

And he talked about the mosaic of America, with a glint in every piece of glass.

Geno was both a prophet and a disciple. He rendered eloquent expression to the plight of the marginalized, or those who felt marginalized, in any society. Drawing on experiences from his own life, as the son of a coal mining family, Guido and Josephine Baroni, of Italian-American Catholic heritage living in the hills of Pennsylvania. You have to visit that mining town of Acosta to really appreciate from whence he came.

He'd often ask the question, thinking about the plays that have been written in those days, "What happens to a raisin in the sun? Does it dry up? Does it explode? Or does it mature to plumpness and worth?"

If you went to the movies with Geno -- I don't know if he ever got the content of the movie, I guess he did. But he was more interested in the credits at the end, and who was missing. And he would ask me, as an American of Polish-American heritage, "How come the Poles are always the assistant film editors?"

(Laughter.)

"Why aren't they writing the plays" -- and this is no offense to any person of Polish extraction in America who's now written plays and who is the main actor or actress. But he was always conscious of who's missing, who's not there.

As I watched him create, and try to understand, and develop a new language for America, I kept thinking to Theodore White's book, in Search of History, where there is the sentence, "Leaders are people who, in seeking to find themselves, change the lives of other people." He surely, for those of us who knew him, transformed us. I know Donna Shalala, who I believe is the president of the University of Florida or Miami, now, said he transformed her life forever. She never looked at the world or America in the same way again.

Geno was an activist for social justice and human development, who engaged directly in addressing the turmoil of his time. He was not an ivory tower priest, nor intellectual. He was the first Catholic priest to march in Selma. As he used to say, "I begged forgiveness; I didn't ask permission."

He was the first major figure to provide a counterpoint, and to get positive alternatives to the negative political course being set in those days by Governor George Wallace, and the racial turmoil in our country, and the alienated white working class. He grasped it all, and he tried to make it positive, tried to make it positive.

He was interested in public policy, and he was a public servant as well. He was the highest ranking Roman Catholic priest ever to serve in the government of the United States, on the executive side as the Assistant Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. And when he finished with that job, he said, "I did my time. Done my time in the building with 13 basements."

And behind that great genius, though, of trying to move new bills, new ideas, into American life, he used to say, "You know, it isn't the money. It isn't the money. It's how they think about solving the problem."

And he was a prophet. I was in meetings with him in the Roosevelt room in the White House at the time. I remember how some of the people from some of the departments, some of the political appointees literally made fun of him.

I remember a young gentleman who had worked with him, an African-American I believe from Washington -- I remember Geno getting so angry at this meeting because they couldn't understand job training, and I can remember this young gentleman reaching over and taking his arm. He said, "Father, it's okay, Father. They really don't understand, Father. It's okay, Father."

And I remember how he so passionately felt about the programs he was trying to change. Geno also lobbied. He identified every member of a subcommittee in the Congress, where he knew he had to get a bill through, and he made sure that in that person's district, there was a project. And he knew how to move bills. And he knew it wasn't easy.

Geno was a Democrat with a small "D." Some people have been talking about partisanship up here. Geno built coalitions between parties. He really didn't -- he was beyond party. He was an inventor and I think taking from the Catholic tradition of subsidiarity, he always believed doing things at the lowest level, first, and trying to solve the problem down there before you move to higher levels. He believed very much in the common man and woman, and empowering them.

He was an inventor, and a wordsmith, and an explorer. He invented new words, and he invented many new institutions, and I'll just tick off a few of them because others I know we'll cover: the word "ethnicity," which I've mentioned; "multiculturalism," "convergent issues," "social dynamite," "diversity," "neighborhood self-help," "human development," "convergent issues," "roots," "heritage." Now he wouldn't take claim to any one of these words as being his own, but that was the milieu in which he was swimming.

Like Julia Childs with new recipes, he tested new ingredients, and through new institutions. And the campaign for human development, now the largest foundation of the Roman Catholic Church, dealing with not just charity, but empowerment. He did that, against great opposition.

The Neighborhood Self-help Development program that was first passed back in the 1970s, which didn't get a lot of support, didn't have a lot of money, but today if we look back there are thousands and thousands of community development corporations, faith-based organizations, in our country, nongovernmental groups. And I give him so much credit in those, as Monsignor Linder who will be talking here, who gave them life. Who gave their lives to creating these, really for the future, more than the present.

Geno saw that women weren't at the table. He made me feel good. He saw me. He let my talent rise. He let me apply my talent, he asked me to run for Congress. He's the reason I'm in the Congress of the United States.

The National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, he founded that. The Cooperative Bank, he and Esther Pearson fought so hard to carry that by one vote in the Senate. The National Italian American Foundation, these are different pieces of glass in the mosaic of American life, that he helped set in place. Community development credit unions. The Neighborhood Commission, which Joe McNeely mentioned. Neighborhood arts, he loved Joe Duffy; he met a compatriot, somebody who could understand and share his genius.

So, he was an inventor, a wordsmith, and an explorer. I know Geno would tell me to stop complementing him, or describing him, and talk about what we're supposed to do, because he was an activist, first. And he got his hands into the dough. And he had a forward vision. In his final prayer says, "Dear God, may there be new prophets to meet new needs.

"Dear God, may there be new profits to meet new needs." What did he do? What can we learn from him? Number one, he identified and trained young Americans to carry forward and develop his vision. I meet them all the time, I meet them all over the country. They

are in amazing places, they're in churches, they're at universities, they're in public life, they're in prison ministries, they're in social work, they're in publications, writing; they are everywhere. How do we do that? How do we build on that?

Secondly, he established a decentralized network in specific places to test his ideas, where people could find common ground and carry on his work. Community development corporations, faith-based groups, credit unions, places where people -- common men and women -- could put this together, and he would help them struggle.

I've asked myself, how do we create these places? How do we make it easier for people working in these situations to learn from one another; to collect, to share, to teach? And I have a proposal I'm gonna make here since I have Father Monsignor Linder here at the table with me.

In my own community about a week ago we had a major, major turmoil in one of our sections of our community. And there were many mistakes that were made in prevention over the last several years, and many that were made on the spot. But I don't have a place like the New Communities Corporation in my community. I've had Monsignor Linder there a number of times. I've taken people from my community to New Community to try to help them see. They are so overwhelmed they don't know where to start.

And I, personally, through our family foundation, which is a public charity, have committed to send three people from our community to new community for practicum, for six months to a year, to learn. How do we facilitate this? How do we make it honorable to work in these situations?

I think if Lourdes College in Ohio, and Seton Hall in New Jersey, could figure out at a very small level some type of partnership, you have the multinational of community development corporations in this country. We can learn from you, we need to learn from you: how do we put that together? That is an achievable goal.

One of the other tasks I'm working on as a member of Congress and have not been successful, but still intend to be -- and I will end very shortly here -- connecting the various ethnic museums that we have in this country, where archives are not up on the Web.

I find them everywhere. I was at a Czech Museum in Iowa, in Cedar Rapids I believe it was. I've been at a Ukrainian Museum and archives in Cleveland. There are African-American museums across this country, not just the one here in Washington. We have collections that we're not paying any attention to, and the Smithsonian has not been able to connect and to bring those collections up. That's still something I'm working on. But this would complement, in a decentralized network of places that are engaged in this understanding who we are as Americans -- Geno's sister, Rosie Hebda has just come in, we love her. Glad she's here. Welcome, Rosie.

I think that we need publications. We have a lot of really literate people from the universities. We need to put some of this together. We need to publish the results of Geno's efforts, now nearly three decades old, to augment the teaching that would be done. The lessons, the recipes from the kitchen, we have them. He had a favorite expression, "If it isn't written, it didn't happen."

"If it isn't written, it didn't happen." Well, we've been about doing it for a long time. Let me just give, from my own life, I'm only one little chink in the glass mosaic. Twenty-Five years ago I mentioned that we were involved in this plan for the near Northwest side of Chicago. It has been successful. I want to write this history. We have the original plan. This should be done in a trilogy. This is just one place in America. It was called "Program for Improvement, 1977 to 1980, Community 21, East Humboldt Park, Chicago, a Community of Neighborhoods."

Ed Marciniak from Loyola University then did a publication called "Reviving an Inner-city Community," describing what was done. And now 25 years later, through Bill Droll and the Institute of Urban Life in Chicago, we have the final piece. It worked.

It worked, but for one mistake: we didn't provide enough housing for the elderly. Used to buy a house and a lot in that community for \$5,000. Today, you can't touch a lot for under \$100,000. But in that neighborhood, which is multiethnic, with bicker dyke (phonetic), we have turnkey housing, we have section eight, we have housing for the elderly, we have public housing. It is multiracial, multiethnic. It's more heavily Latino than it was 30 years ago, but nonetheless it is incredible.

But those positive chinks in the glass are there, and we need to put them together.

Finally, let me just end with a story about Toledo, Ohio, my beloved community. It got some bad press because of an incident there about a week ago. Why do we need this? Because America still needs Geno's message. Geno has the way forward. Geno has the way forward for neighborhoods like Toledo, which were invaded by a National Socialist party group a week ago, and then who were termed by the press as neo-Nazis -- to cause trouble -- and then by anarchists who wanted to stand up to the neo-Nazis. They created altercations. We had hundreds of demonstrators, a situation that got out of hand, where our local police had to fire into the crowd with tear gas. We had no one killed but over 125 people have been arrested now. And the local people pay the price, and the people in the neighborhood paid the price.

As I was thinking about what to do, I thought, "Well, let's hire Marcy Kaptur and she'll go into this area called the (unintelligible) and she'll do what she did in Chicago 25 or 30 years ago. It absolutely is a prescription for success."

Thank you for allowing me to talk this morning, and I look forward to what the other panelists have to say.