

Lawrence O'Rourke, the author of *Geno, the Life and Mission of Geno Baroni*.

(Unedited Transcript)

Thank you, Senator Harris, and good morning, everybody. I'm going to speak this morning a little bit about Geno, attempt to bring back a little bit of his personality, tell a few stories -- I'm not an urban planner, I'm a journalist -- And maybe offer a few ideas, from my perspective of 40 years in and around journalism and the promotion of public policy ideas.

As Alan Curtis said, Geno Baroni was a perplexingly complex man. He was a man of many parts, often in conflict with each other. In addition, Geno was a man whose style and personality epitomized contradiction. He wrestled with those conflicts. He wrestled with the impulses and the flaws within American society, as well as he did with his own moods and his own mission.

It was my privilege to be invited by Geno to be his biographer. We had known each other for about 15 years, having been introduced to Geno by my spouse-to-be, who was at that time a volunteer at one of Geno's inner-city projects. Throughout the years, I, as a political reporter, frequently consulted Geno for his shrewd and enlightened insight into politics and government. Later, we served together in the Carter administration. Geno, of course, had been critical in getting Carter elected.

When Geno asked me to be his biographer in 1981, we struck a deal. I would ask the questions that a biographer should ask, even those that made him uncomfortable and he did not want answer. And there were a lot of them. He would encourage others to talk freely, even those who had at times fought him. And there were some of them, too.

Our last conversation, a brief one, took place in the hospital room on the night before he died. In his final days, he pumped me for news of the newly launched Mondale-Ferraro campaign. He predicted, accurately as it turned out, that Reagan would overwhelm Mondale, and that Ferraro's selection would hurt the Democrats that presidential election. And in his final days, Baroni wanted to talk nothing but politics.

On various days during the nearly four years that I questioned Geno, and traveled with him to some of the places where he had worked, he was ill at ease with my questions, particularly the "why" questions. He acted, I became convinced, more by instinct than by finely tuned calculation -- which may make the mission of this forum very difficult. He didn't really know why he had done something as extraordinary, or at least he couldn't put it into words. Baroni would have been an unlikely spokesman for a new progressive agenda. But his actions and techniques may well serve as a model for those who want to champion a grassroots revival of a progressive agenda.

Geno Baroni was genuine. He was a political natural. He had a feel for the right thing and how to do it. And when he spoke of poverty and injustice, no one doubted that he knew whereof he spoke, because he lived there. I saw evidence that he was an introspective man, even though he refused to do much introspection with me or others, of the calculations that had carried him to his actions.

His secretiveness was used as a knock against him by some coworkers in the social justice field. This forum may emerge as a major step towards clarifying the Baroni principles.

The time is long past for the establishment of a Baroni center on a college campus, that would study and educate on the values that Baroni expressed and embodied, and this forum may be a step on the road to that. In the course of interviewing Baroni, he often said that I forced him to conduct what he called a "life review." That of course did not guarantee that he answered my questions, particularly as I said on why he took this or that course of action. He frequently responded to "why" questions by offering a parable, or by reciting from the anecdote-filled sermon homily that he developed and delivered hundreds of times, almost word for word.

And you've all heard the story, but I'm going to repeat it anyway. He was invited to meet with a group of nuns, a conference of nuns over three days, developing and deepening their understanding of his philosophy, and how it might help them get to critical decisions facing their communities. The nuns were impressed, and very moved the first time they heard Geno's homily sermon. But at three straight meetings, Geno made the same homily sermon, the same remarks, to the same audience of nuns. And by the third meeting, they knew the lines that were coming, and could almost say them with him, as you would from the classic lines from "Casablanca," or "Easy Rider," or "The Graduate." You know, I suspect that if Geno were here this morning, he'd deliver the same speech, and I'm convinced that most of you would anticipate the lines.

And still be stirred by them. Those lines encapsulated Geno: his affection for ordinary people, including friends and family. His outrage at injustice. His optimism that change would come to people, as people became more aware of the injustices in our society.

So, we have quite a job ahead of us at this forum on public morality: interpreting the "Genoisms," and applying them to the ambitious goals set out by the organizers. And I'll take a crack at it.

It's fitting, I believe, that we gather to discuss what Geno Baroni and his principles might offer, in terms of a progressive social agenda, at this moment in US political history. It goes without saying that I wished Geno were on the program. On this 75th birthday, we are at a moment in history when the moral agenda appears to have been seized by a political movement that would not embrace the political philosophy, or social justice theology of Geno Baroni. He proclaimed social justice as the absolute extension of his values; values carefully shaped by his religious convictions as a member of, and indeed, as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. Geno cited church documents as he talked about those values, but he did not view them as the exclusive province of the Roman Catholic Church. He made clear that he viewed those values as common to humankind, articulated in different ways and at different times by various church leaders, and some non-church leaders. For Geno Baroni, justice was not sectarian, not doctrinal.

When Geno was pressed for a religious justification for his values, he cited the Beatitudes. But he quickly added that his values were equally formed as he watched his father dig for coal in western Pennsylvania, as he saw women and children in Washington driven from their homes, as he saw society put public funds into

superhighways that carried the affluent to their spacious suburban homes, while diverting their eyes from the homeless.

He said his values could be found in demanding economic development funds for neighborhoods, from city officials who would rather build stadiums and subsidized downtown hotels.

The truth is Geno would not fit in with many of those who now claim the moral high ground, and proclaim it as an act of religious virtue that government cut programs for the poor, and reduce taxes on the affluent. Geno was not very good at selective quotation of scriptures. He was more at home reading from the New York Times, and citing his own experiences, as he walked through the streets of neglected neighborhoods in big cities.

He likes to tell stories that when he was in the seminary, at Evansburg, Maryland, he spent more time reading newspapers and magazines in the Mount St. Mary's library, than he spent reading the assigned course reading in theology. Geno was, to put it mildly, uncomfortable talking about the issues of personal individual morality that seem to be this stock in trade of those who claim to be right, politically and religiously -- that is, the religious right.

Baroni's issues centered around treatment of the poor and dispossessed; those not only without tax, but also those without jobs, or rights, or ineffective representation in the White House, Congress, state, and local councils. I think today Geno would welcome this conference, and would be energized by the discussions of how to move a progressive agenda. I want to talk for just a minute in closing about a couple of his tactics. And one of them flows from my own experience, as I said, as a journalist of more than 40 years. His first tactic was to identify a problem where he might be effective, study the odds of fixing it, and getting on the agenda. He did not believe in taking on unwinnable problems. He was no Don Quixote. He was a seat-of-the-pants, practical and pragmatic political animal, which didn't need -- he didn't need polls or focus groups to establish his agenda. He was also a realist. He was more comfortable with the old ward leader style practiced in Boston and Philadelphia and Chicago: know your constituents, know your neighborhoods, whether it be Southeast Baltimore, or Newark, or Cleveland, or Toledo. Early on, Geno looked for ways to dramatize his problems. He knew how to sell the story to the press, and he saw that as a vital component of any strategy. He returned reporters' phone calls. I want to close on that note, because I speak from my experience. The use of the press by those who aspire to build progressive movements on the basis of morality must be finely tuned. As the last national campaign demonstrated, we are in an era when politicians have seized morality as a political issue, looking for the votes of conservative Christians. Progressives seem awkward these days when talking about morality as a political factor. The identification and definition of quotes, "moral issues," close quotes, is as current as the debate over the nomination of Harriet Myers to the US Supreme Court, as conservative commentators fret that she may not be the payoff that President Bush owes to the religious right that claims to have elected him. The principal goals of that movement include reversing Roe V. Wade, blocking same-sex marriage, and the loosening of restraints of government. Geno would say to those issues, "they're not my issues." Progressives need to be aware that when they use the word, "morality," in quotes, and "social justice," in quotes, in contemporary politics, they may hold a losing hand, because those terms do not have the same political attractiveness they had when Geno

Baroni practiced and proclaimed those principles. But the progressive community needs more than a new vocabulary. Geno's great gift was in establishing social justice issues as more than sectarian moral issues, but as matters of universal conscience, simply as the right thing to do. And that to make the neighborhood better is to make the city better, and to make the nation better, and to make the world better. So it may not be as tough a sell as recent elections have suggested. Geno would want us to try.