

MARION: What He Meant to Us

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Washington, DC - I met him in the early 70's, well before he became Councilman or Mayor. He ran the Pride Inc. program for kids off the street who flocked to his headquarters on the corner of 16th & U for street cleaning work. At the time I was Director of the Latin American Youth Center. He came to visit me and we talked about starting a Latino group at Pride Inc. Shortly thereafter a dozen or so young Hispanics, led by one of Carlos Rosario's sons, were based at the Youth Center. They held their meetings and stored their brooms and shovels in the basement. Even then, when nobody gave a second thought to DC's growing Latino community, Barry was already building ties that would last him a lifetime.

Our relationship deepened when I became a Roving Leader dealing with delinquency and drug prevention among adolescents and he was running his first campaign for Mayor. I had started writing political stories for a Spanish language newspaper and during that campaign we took a photograph of Marion eating an ice cream cone at Pepe Lujan's, 'The Scoop' on 18th St. It became an iconic photograph in the Latino community and Pepe, one of his earliest supporters. I can still see in my mind's eye Barry walking up 18th St. with a youngster 50 feet ahead waving a flag and pounding on a drum while Ivanhoe Donaldson, his most trusted aide, handed out flyers. Even then, Marion couldn't walk a block without stopping to shake someone's hand and listen to their story.

Soon after his victory none of us who were present can forget the community meeting where Marion entered and walked straight up to Sonia Gutierrez, Director of a community English instruction program for adults, and kneeling before her, head bowed, whispered into her ear in front of a largely African American crowd, signaling to everyone her importance and the respect he had for her. He hired her husband, Jose Gutierrez, to run the city's personnel department and later the Administrative Services portfolio, at that time the city's chief procurement office. No other Hispanic ever wielded Jose's power in DC government. He wrote many of the personnel regulations still in place today. Over the years he ran those offices DC hired hundreds of Latinos for government jobs and awarded tens of millions of dollars in small business contracts to a growing Hispanic entrepreneurial sector. Together, they helped build the region's Latino middle class.

I left the Barry administration in the early 80's to take on the task of publishing a weekly Spanish language newspaper and, as you can imagine, our relationship became more contentious. I always admired the Mayor and addressed him as Mr. Mayor as recently as the last time we saw each other at a City Council hearing 10 days before he died. If you watch the video of that Council session on the soccer stadium proposal you'll notice at the end of my testimony I responded to his questions suggesting the city name the new municipal center proposed for Anacostia after him. Let's hope that idea has posthumous legs.

My footnote in the grandiose story of this towering figure of DC's recent history will always be that I was one of the very first persons to be quoted publicly by name regarding his problems with addiction on the front page of the Washington Post no less. It was the beginning of his third term and things were starting to fall apart. I took a young editor from my newspaper to meet him at his office in the Wilson building and was stunned to see the bad shape he was in. It was 3 pm on a Monday afternoon and that evening he would attend the Tyson-Spinks boxing match in Atlantic City.

Marion could always quote chapter and verse about most anything related to DC government. Thousands of details he could recite off the cuff. He always did his homework. He was brilliant that way. He knew the estimate of how many undocumented immigrants lived in the city, the budgets of the major Hispanic non-profits and even the number of clients at Andromeda Mental Health. But on that day he couldn't remember a thing. His clothes were in disarray, his eyes wandered, he couldn't concentrate, was constantly thirsty and asking for water and depended on Tina, his Chief of Staff, or his Latino Affairs Director, Arlene Gillespie, to answer questions for him. He seemed tired and distracted. We would later find out he'd been partying until late the night before at the Hilton with Jesse Jackson who was running again for President. To my considerable astonishment, just a hours later that very same evening there he was on TV --animated,

standing in the aisle bobbing and weaving, shadow boxing and shouting at the fighters. Somehow he had recuperated remarkably well in just a couple of hours.

A week later I asked Arlene what was going on? She knew of my past work with delinquency and drug prevention and turned the question back at me. I told her if I didn't know any better I'd suspect the Mayor had a drug problem. Arlene walked away in silence. I recounted the story on the record to my friend and Post reporter Linda Wheeler who wrote it down and used it many months later as part of her front page story on the subject. When Marion read the piece I was at a Hispanic print convention in Albuquerque, but I shall never forget the panicked phone conversation with my editor describing how the Mayor had called to berate me with language that, to put it mildly, she was unaccustomed to hearing.

In spite of that incident, Marion never held a grudge or turned his back on our friendship. He understood my public comments were made with respect by someone who considered himself a friend and was worried about his health. Years later, during his fourth term, my newspaper needed the city's support for a vital project that would secure our presence in town. I recall the conference call where the Mayor gave explicit instructions to his staff to provide whatever support they could to help us get this done. It was a gracious and generous gesture. He never forgot his friends and always remained loyal to them.

Our last business together was a fundraiser DC Hispanic Contractor's held for him during what would be his final campaign in 2012. We invited him to a private luncheon at the fanciest Spanish restaurant in town and raised \$25K for him. He had never been to La Taberna del Alabardero and was immediately impressed and at ease, surrounded in the private ballroom by good friends. Jose Gutierrez; still close to him after all these years; Carlos Perdomo, son of one of the first Hispanic contractors to ever win public construction projects from the city during Marion's tenure; Alberto Gomez who he appointed to the first Convention Center Board; Pepe Lujan now owner of the hot nightclub Habana Village and a host of other old buddies were present. He was warmly and lovingly received.

He joked and commented on his past relationships with everyone in the room, reminiscing about a generation spent as a friend to our businesses and our community. In the middle of the speech he apologized and whispered into his phone and then continued the remarks. Fifteen minutes later an attractive young woman from his Ward, who had obviously never been to La Taberna or any other Spanish restaurant for that matter, walked in and sat down next to him. Marion, with a Cheshire grin on his face, ordered the waiters to bring her paella and sangria and she was delighted. Marion never changed or apologized for the way he lived. Among his friends, his Latino brothers and sisters that day, he was showing off and telling us he still had it. He was still alive and still 'the man'. We sat back, smiled, rolled our eyes and looked at each other. For all his foibles, though, he was still our guy and we stuck with him to the very end.

One of my favorite poems is the Garcia Lorca ode to a bullfighter who died in the ring. When I learned of Marion's death the closing stanza immediately came to mind;

*"It will be a long time, if ever, before there is born
an Andalusian so true, so rich in adventure.
I sing of his elegance with words that groan,
and remember a sad breeze through the olive trees."*

Marion wasn't a Spanish bullfighter, he was a son of Washington DC, but I shall always remember his pride, his bearing and the rich adventure it was to have known him. I shall think of you Marion when a sad breeze blows and defend the hard won achievements I fear are now in jeopardy. The struggle and effort it took to accomplish what you did on behalf of the poor, the working class and the disenfranchised will not long be forgotten. I'll certainly never, ever forget you my friend as long as there are injustices and unfairness, as long as minorities are forgotten and discriminated against here, in the place you protected and defended. You'll continue to be alive in our hearts and we shall remember you as we fight to keep your legacy alive.

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