

Cultivating Justice in the Garden State: My Life in the Colorful World of New Jersey Politics

Ray Lesniak

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For as long as I've been following New Jersey politics, Ray Lesniak has been in the thick of it. To a brand-new legislative staffer, he was the hard-charging state chair who reminded Democrats how to win. I came up with the generation of young political operatives that included Salena Carroll, whom Ray would later marry. He was exciting and fun to be around.

As time went on, he became a conscience for the state—not just how to win, but why to win. About what's important. Maybe the most lasting impression I'll ever have of Ray is the personal counsel he gave Governor McGreevey in the days leading up to his historic resignation. As a member of his senior staff, this was a time when everything else fell by the wayside; the world seemed to stop. Ray's recounting of that singular time in our state is powerful, and something many New Jerseyans will want to read.

In one of life's small ironies, Ray writes about "the unlikely journey that brought" him "from the streets of postwar Elizabeth to the lanes of early twenty-first century Caen," where he won the Memorial de Caen Human Rights prize. What he could not have known is that he also wrote about an earlier connection with Caen, this one much closer to home. McGreevey's resignation "was all decided in one meeting, in the library of Drumthwacket," the governor's residence. That room, the setting for that critical decision, has been described as dominated by a baronial stone fireplace, made entirely of stone from Caen.

Ray reminds us to take a step back and mark the journey that blue-collar and blue state New Jersey has taken. After all, this is the story of one New Jerseyan, but it is also the story of New Jersey itself—of our role as a place that continues to welcome each generation of immigrants

to their new home and nation, and draws from the vitality and strength that diversity brings us. Ray encourages us to take the long view and see that in his lifetime, New Jersey has gone from one of the nation's most industrialized states to one of its best educated.

Cultivating Justice in the Garden State is an account of our attitude toward acceptance and tolerance. I suspect many New Jersey families don't often discuss what Ray does openly—alcoholism and only a grudging appreciation for the power of education to change lives. But I also suspect that many New Jerseyans will recognize and identify with these themes and they make our tolerance and our growth that much more striking. If New Jersey is a fairer, more just state—a place where all of us are valued, where parents come and stay to give their kids the best and most acceptance they can—then this is a story of New Jersey becoming that place.

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