

BRONX ROOTS STILL NURTURE CAREER PATHS

by David Gonzalez

When Louis J. Cappelli graduated from William H. Taft High School in 1949, he ended up doing what most of his buddies in the Bronx did: not much. There was a recession, and jobs were tight. He would walk from his home at Courtlandt Avenue and 160th Street, cross Park Avenue and head to their hangout on Morris Avenue and 165th, where the biggest attraction some days was watching the street get paved.

“None of us was working,” he said. “We had a nice time hanging out on the corner, shooting pool, listening to music and going to the movies. We made a few dollars delivering orders.”

Then came another order.

“My father said, ‘Louie, get a job,’” Mr. Cappelli said. “My father only had to tell me once.” So Louie dressed himself up in his high school graduation suit, bought the New York Times and looked in the classifieds under “Office Boy,” because that was “what I thought I was capable of doing.”

One ad led him to the Standard Factors Corporation.

“I was instantly offered the job,” he said. “I started working the same day. And I’ve been here ever since.”

Has he ever. Louie, the iceman’s son, has gone from the street corner to the corner office as the chairman and chief executive officer of Sterling Bancorp, the successor to Standard Factors. His 50-year journey left him grateful for life’s many blessings, starting with his parents’ work ethic. So when he goes to his Park Avenue office, he remembers that road’s northern reaches in his old neighborhood.

“I never forgot where I come from,” he said. “I tell my colleagues, when you look in the mirror, don’t kid yourself about who you are. Don’t try to be anything else.”

There was a time when others told him to forget about being much of anything. He admits to having been an average student, one who sometimes sassed the teachers. Back then, his family lived at Morris Avenue and 162nd Street, near Yankee Stadium....

His father, Peter, who came to America as a teenager, made his living hauling hunks of ice. Though he was not educated, he kept track of accounts in his mind. He taught his children the value of respecting family and community. Mr. Cappelli’s two brothers and sister taught him the value of education, urging him to get an academic diploma at Taft, rather than go to the vocational schools that his friends attended.

He rose through the bank’s hierarchy while earning a degree from City College at night. He studied accounting, a discipline that he speaks of reverently. The numbers on a spreadsheet, he says, tell stories of businesses and the people who work for them, including his bank. He feels a responsibility to them, he said, because at one point or another in his career, he probably had their job....

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“I traveled through the ranks, so I know what it’s like. I didn’t come out of Harvard Business School and start as a vice president....

“If you’re smart enough,” he said. “It’s not luck. It’s timing. You need to be in the station at the right time.”

Or the classroom. A few years ago he was Principal for a Day at Taft High School....In one sophomore class, Noemi Cruz listened to his corporate success story.

“How do I get a job at your bank?” she asked, half joking.

He hired her. She began working summers, and continued after graduation. She is now an administrative assistant, working full time while going to New York University at night, courtesy of the bank.

“I want to stay right here,” she said. “Hopefully, I’ll get his office....”

“I can relate to her,” he said. He snapped his fingers. “Like that, I can relate to her.”

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