

A Blended Family and Kitchens

When I got the apartment on Hawthorn Road, Judy moved in with me. At the same time I got the job in Home Depot. I recently uncovered a letter which I had written to my father, a Christmas letter, I guess, in which I tell him the very good news.

Judy was very happy to have a family, and to be a mother to Jacob and Rachael. Both of them were still in elementary school, and really sweet children. I was happy to be back on track, working, having the children stay overnight with me three nights a week, and joining us on vacations.

Camping was one of the things I liked to do my entire life. Before Judy was in my life, I would take the kids camping to a state park in the middle of Massachusetts, or to Nickerson State Park on Cape Cod. A few memories:

- Watching the International Space Station fly over at dusk, and the kids looking at it as if it were no big thing.
- Going to the Unitarian Church in Brewster Columbus Day weekend, hearing a sermon on simple living, and then, during the coffee hour, standing awkwardly, alone, unnoticed, as thinking as to how we were certainly living simply that weekend.
- Taking the tent down during a torrential thunderstorm, with lightning hitting a tree far too close to us.

Then camping at Gilbert Lake State Park, in upstate New York, close to Morris, a small town, where the Ostego County Fair was held. I wanted to show the kids how I had grown up, the 4-H projects, the variety of chickens and rabbits that would be exhibited, some of the crafts that were exhibited, and, if I was lucky, a Demolition Derby. This was the first summer with Judy. There was a demolition derby. I was the only one who liked the noise, and the smell, and the crazy car driving that is part and parcel of a demolition derby.

Oh well.

I HAD A JOB! The wilderness was over (I hoped). Not only that, I had a place to live, a really nice place. True, I was renting, but it was a block walk to where the school bus picked up and dropped off the kids, and I could hang out on the porch of Dana and

Sandra, with the other parents, waiting for the bus. Not only that, the kids and I would walk from my house to Turner's Pond, and feed the ducks. Not only that, but Jacob's first friend, who he had met when we lived on Hawthorne Road previously, Chris, lived across the street. Not only that, Parkway was an easy walk away. Not only that, Judy and I were living together, creating a family.

Life was good, not what I had hoped for when I came East, but at least seemingly stabilized. It had been a long haul, more than a decade ...

I learned a lot at Home Depot. It is a big box store. It is corporate. It was military in its orientation. By that, I mean, we on the floor were like privates, and had to do whatever the Assistant Managers wanted us to do. "Yes Sir!" was the appropriate response. Actually, we in the kitchen design department did not have it as bad as other people there. The kitchen design section needed to know how to use the design software, and needed access to outside phone lines, in order to discuss things with customers, was an elite unit. Just above us were the sergeants, the department managers, people who wanted to enter management, and wanted to show that they were capable of managing employees, and inventory. And would do anything to please their bosses. Again, kitchen design was spared the worst abuse, because we had no inventory and negotiated our own on duty times.

Above the department managers were the assistant store managers. Typically they had come up through the ranks, and shown their loyalty not only to Home Depot, but to their bosses. They made a lot more money, but they worked longer hours, much longer hours. They were salaried, with bonuses tied to how much profit their sections earned. And above them was the store manager, up from the ranks, and above the store manager was the district manager. I was too low on the totem pole to even know who that was, but if he was scheduled for a visit, everything became ship shape, on the double.

What kind of abuse? Well, for example, by law, we were allotted a 15 minute break in the morning and afternoon, and half hour for lunch. By law, also, we had to take our lunch within five hours of clocking in. But a customer might show up during our fourth hour, and it usually took a couple of hours to complete a design, and price it out, maybe even close the sale. So, rather than ask the customer to come back because I had to go to lunch, and potentially lose the sale, I just kept working, past the five hour mark. Not only was I written up by my assistant manager, but he unleashed a considerable

amount of vitriol. Why? It did not need to be that way, a little kindness goes a long way. I learned, from a former assistant manager, after he had taken a job with a vendor, that assistant managers were not allowed to be decent people. It was like officers fraternizing with enlisted soldiers. In fact, one technique promoted by all the big box stores is the employee of the month program, not a promotion, but a firing, for no other reason than to instill fear in the rest of us. We were but cogs in their machine.

I had even missed the worst of it. Before I was there, just after the store opened, I heard they had all store meetings where the employees were required to chant, "H O M E D E P O T – HOME DEPOT!" I guess it was like basic training, building solidarity. I'm glad I missed it.

Our section chief was a kid, Joe, but our functioning section chief was a kitchen designer, Tim. Tim graduated from college just in time for his planned high school teaching job to disappear, due to the anti-property tax initiative which was passed in Massachusetts, Proposition 2 ½. It was the graying of the public schools, as recent hires lost jobs, while those with the most seniority held theirs. Tim got the short end of that stick.

He was a good teacher, and taught me a lot. Home Depot had the most commonly used design software, 2020, with catalogs for the brands it sold, from the cheapest, assemble it yourself Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF), guaranteed to dissolve if it got wet, through semi-custom cabinets, to true custom cabinets, competing with the better cabinet shops. I learned the tricks of the trade from Tim, and from Jim, and Jamal, and we had fun. They got to know me, and from where I was coming, and why I wound up at Home Depot. Jim said that I had been blackballed. It made sense to me.

I learned about counter-tops too, cheap formica tops, preformed, more expensive counter-tops, custom made, and Corian, custom made, and sinks, and faucets, and appliances, and flooring, and all the things that go into a kitchen. I learned a trade. I had been a shade tree carpenter, and became a trained kitchen designer.

Tim, who scheduled us, arranged my schedule so that I did not have to work when I had the kids. I learned the hard way, that working an 8 hour shift, in the evening until the store closed at 9 PM, and then working the early shift, starting at 7 AM, was a brutal way to work. Two experiences with that, and no more. Tim agreed with me. He had a

life, and worked his schedule, and my schedule around, with the other designers filling in the holes.

Jim was very funny. Jim was stumble down drunk, but I could not tell. Tim was more straight laced, but would smile at Jim's jokes. Jokes like this: "What does it mean when the Post Office has it's flag at half mast? They are hiring." And a number of jokes, a lot of jokes, about the predilections of catholic priests, this before the child abuse scandal was made public. How things have changed!

One day, a guy came in, just to talk, he said. He did not really want a kitchen, but he was on his lunch hour, and he thought he might just wander around Home Depot. He told me he was a state cop. Somehow the conversation got around to "Did I have kids?" and I shared some of my hurt, anger and frustration at how I had been run through the system. He seemed sympathetic. I think he told me that he lived in Milton. A month later, he came in again, and we talked again. His job, I learned, was to investigate people suspected of harming children. He would not tell me the specifics, but I presumed it was physical and sexual abuse, and said that he had a really tough job.

It was not until about twenty years after that, while I was visiting my friend John in the Catskills, that I realized he had been investigating me, and was reading me, to see my reaction when he told me his job. I'm sure he cleared me of any such abuse, because I am sure I would have heard more, a lot more, if he thought the accusations were credible. The accusations ... where did they come from? I don't know, but I have my suspicions. Nasty, really nasty.

Home Depot had a cartoon mascot, Homer, who was dressed in orange with a red cap, set at a jaunty angle. One of my fellow "associates" dressed like him, and knew he was doing it. He got the joke. Because we had phones that could get outside, he would occasionally sit at one of our desks to make a phone call. This was well before cell phones were common. One day, I was walking down the sink aisle, and saw several men, one of them wearing what was to me the best quality suit I had ever seen. It just looked right. I recognized who was wearing it. To my surprise, it was Bernie Marcus, the founder of Home Depot, based in Atlanta, nationwide, and at the time expanding to worldwide. I said, "Well, hello." He realized he had been made, an immediately one of his flunkies came over to me and asked where the faucets were. I gave him a long look, and motioned for him to follow me one aisle over, to the faucet display. He looked at it.

I asked if he had any questions. Hearing none, I told him I would be in adjacent kitchen design, in case he needed any help.

Sitting at one of our desks, in our kitchen design pod, was "Homer." I told him to get off the phone, and come with me. "Big tits?" he asked. "No," I said, pointing down the aisle. He saw who I had seen, and scurried down to catch up with them. When he got close enough, he bellowed, "Can I help you?" A nearby customer jumped about a foot off the ground. Bernie did not need any help.

A couple of hours later, the store manager got a call, telling him that Bernie was happy with the way the store was being run. Apparently, if he was in town for some larger purpose, talking to his investors, I don't know, he would always drop in on a store or two, unannounced, to see how things were really working at the ground level. I was told that if I ever spotted him, to immediately call the manager on duty. I thought I might get a raise.

I had already gotten my year longevity raise, so that was that. About a month later, a young man came by, said he worked for the Home Office, and that he knew me from when I taught carpentry at the Home Builders Institute, and that I was one of the few staff there who seemed to really care. I thanked him for the complement, and then he told me to stick at Home Depot, because good things would come.

I liked that, because I was still in the mind set that if I worked hard, kept my nose clean, and made sales, there was room for me to rise in the company. Tim, sensing my ambition, told me that the only step up was department supervisor, and then Assistant Manager, but no one were taken out of kitchen design onto that ladder. We were the prima donnas of the store. We were making a lot of money for the company, right where we were. But I had hopes ...

Winter was closing in, which meant that sales would slow down. Home Depot staffs its stores based on sales. It makes sense. No reason to have people working when there was no work to do. The part time employees were the first to go, and then full time employees would be switched to Christmas tree sales, and then, the most amazing thing happened. True to form, our assistant manager called us all together, plumbing, fixtures, kitchen, kitchen design, and told two or three that they were not to show up for work the next day, the day before Christmas. They smiled, and said, "Great, we get paid not to work." Nope, he very curtly told them, "Take a vacation day."

I could not think of a better way to encourage the employees to join a union. I thought about this a little more, and realized everything that came into the store, came in on a semi-trailer truck, the kind that the Teamsters organize. I realized how easy it would be to organize a union at Home Depot, with the cooperation of the Teamsters, who would, at the same time organize the truck drivers, and that this was true not just for Home Depot, but Walmart, and Best Buy, and Bed, Bath and Beyond, and all the big box, national chains, whose floors had billions of dollars of inventory, and paid their employees as little as possible, with as few job benefits as possible. Some people then, and now, working for the big boxes, qualify for food stamps. But nothing is done ...

My department manager's father worked for a family-owned counter-top and kitchen shop in Quincy, and they were expanding, looking for a couple new kitchen designers. I knew someone who had worked for them in the past, to see what the story was, and said they were fine, but they would typically short people money when they left the shop. I had learned about all I could learn from Home Depot, and I was not rising up the way I had hoped, so I reworked my resume, and applied for the job.

I was hired. Payment was draw on commission. I had become a commissioned salesperson. In my entire life, I had never imagined working in the private sector, and never ever imagined working as a commissioned salesperson. It is a completely different world from hourly, or salaried, position. You eat what you kill. If you don't sell, you don't get paid, which means there was a certain competition between the sales person, but there was also a fairness. If you answered the phone, you got the customer. If you were the first person a walk-in saw, the customer was yours.

But I had a lot to learn. The shop carried three lines of cabinets, but most of its sales were custom cabinets, because most of its customers came to buy Corian counter-tops, high priced counter-tops. Corian was its stock in trade, and their volume meant it was a lucrative business for them. Kitchen cabinets were almost an afterthought.

Billy, who had taken over from his father, was no Tim. When I made a mistake, he would yell at me. When I did not make a mistake, he would yell at me. He did not learn this from his father, who was a good businessman. This is just who he was. The year was 1999. I remember, because that was the year my father died, and my walk in the woods across the street from the shop to reflect ...

We knew my father was not doing well, had been declining. Writing the word declining is saying a lot, because people who knew him were always surprised how old he was, and how active he was for someone they had thought was ten or twenty years younger. Bob had turned 89 the summer he died. We, Judy, the kids and me, planned to visit him on my vacation. He did not live long enough for that.

Instead, we went to his Memorial Service. After that, we visited Steve in the Adirondacks. We found a nice place to stay, with a pool. I remember Judy playing like a kid, going down the slide, again, and again, into the pool. It was on that trip that I also go to show the kids where I grew up, in Warsaw, and in Mendon Center. We may even have camped in Millerton, in the back lot of the farm which my father still owned.

Regarding work, things got really strange when Billy renegotiated a very large sale I had made, negotiated it down, and took the money out of my commission. What could I say, except to myself, "Very strange." The next month, as it turned out, I was the top salesman. I was making good money! I was succeeding! But Billy's golf partner buddy, who he had hired as a salesman, was jealous, and arranged that he and I to be alone one morning in the store, where the asshole began to physically threaten me, to the point that I called the cops.

A few weeks later, Billy said that he had never read my resume, and had he read it, he would never have hired me. He was letting me go. He owed me about \$10,000 in commissions. True to form, he did not want to pay me. A friend at First and Second Church put me in touch with a good lawyer, and Billy not only paid me, but my lawyer too.

But I was out of a job. Bouncing around, I got a job at a family owned lumber yard, with the understanding that I would sell kitchens, but in fact, I was on the front desk, processing orders, and, one day shy of the three months that I would have qualified for health insurance, costing them some money, I was let go.

I landed at another family run shop. I was learning more and more about custom cabinetry, and how to sell. This was a husband and wife team, the wife being the majority owner. My job was, aside from sitting in the showroom, to scout potential clients from a list of contractors the business had bought. I guess it was good advertising, to travel around like that, but I never sold one kitchen by doing this. I did, however, discover a development not on the list, and approached the foreman on the

job. He thanked me, said he would be in touch, but when I got back to the showroom, I was upbraided by the husband. Turned out, the contractor was a client of the husband. He thought I was trying to steal a client from him. His wife pointed out that, no, in fact, I was showing initiative.

We were open Saturday mornings, for walk-ins, and this duty was split between me and another salesperson there. One Saturday she asked me to cover for her, which I did. A woman came in, had been driving by, and noticed we sold kitchens. She decided to see what we had. She liked what we had, liked me, and asked me to come out to Wellesley, where they were building a house. It was a very big house, with five bathrooms and a very large kitchen, ... It was the largest sale the shop had ever done. That too made the husband jealous ...

That September was 9/11. Sales stopped. Nothing for over four weeks. I saw an ad in the newspaper for a kitchen designer in Wellesley, a very high end shop, and decided to interview there. They hired me. They fired me a week later, and hat in hand, I went back to my last place. No luck.

I decided to go out on my own, get my contractors license, and became legitimate. Mike Tolan, who owned the property next to the house on Montello Street, and who had told me innumerable and very funny jokes, was most helpful. His signature, and an eight week class to learn how to read the building code, one test, and I was, for the first time in my life, a legitimate, and licensed contractor, no longer worrying that the inspector might find me working without a permit.

Through my participation in Business Networking International (BNI), I not only found several jobs, but also a plumber, and an insurance agent, for my liability insurance and a very strange incident. The purpose of the weekly meeting was to trade leads. If anyone needed a kitchen done, I was supposed to get the referral. The week I joined, the president of chapter, who ran a cleaning company, was in the process of deciding to remodel his kitchen. Immediately, my membership fee paid for itself, and, I connected with his electrician. I think I also found a plumber through this job, and I already had a good connection with a tile store and several counter-top shops. I both got referrals from BNI, and was able to give people referrals. It worked very well, and I also could visit other chapters, because there were few kitchen shops which were members of BNI.

But after two years in the organization, doing well, I thought, I received a call. Three of the women in the organization had gone to the president, and said either I, and another man, leave, or they would leave. I had no idea why. I asked the president, a lawyer, if he had problems with me, and his response was most telling. I had needed a real estate lawyer, we were selling the property on Montello Street, and he referred me to one, and said to me, then, that he would never have referred me had he taken the complaint seriously. I later learned that one of the women was moving her interior design business into kitchen design. At least that made sense to me, that the complaint had to do with competition for business, because each BNI chapter could have only one representative of any particular business. But I had no idea what they found wrong with Mark, the other guy eight-balled.

Selling the property on Montello Street: I managed the property, was responsible for its upkeep, finding tenants, paying the taxes and mortgage, paying for the deleading, all of the above. By this time, the about 2000, it was generating about \$1,000 a month in profit, which was, of course, mine. But then an odd thing happened. Long story short, a tenant called the building department about an issue, Boston's Inspectional Services became involved, and it was obvious to me that I was going to be nickled and dimed by them, well hundred and thousands by them, so it was time to sell the property. Through a real estate friend from First and Second, I got a good price, just before the dot.com bubble burst, and housing prices plunged. When Betsy and I settled up, it was the basis for the down payment of the house where I now live.

I also got an idea for a mail order, web based business, craft kits for kids, called Kidzcrafts. I put about a five thousand dollars into it, but, getting nothing back, pulled the plug.

I write this to show that I had become a small businessman, building a network of contacts, and, most importantly, subcontractors for my kitchen business. After years, decades, of frustration, I was being treated with respect by my peers. I had learned how much of the world lives, not with the cause of making the world a better place, my previous motivation, but simply to survive. And no longer was I doing the physical work, but hiring people, as subcontractors, to do the work. I was an entrepreneur, from the French, *entre*, meaning between, and *prendre*, to take, meaning I was in the middle, taking out a piece of money from each transaction. Well, actually, this is a stretch, but it made sense to me. The economy was booming, and, as I turned 65, I was no longer worried about my retirement, because I knew, the way things were going, I

could work for another ten years, and make more money than I had ever made in my life.

I turned 65 in 2008. Remember what happened? The Great Recession ... and with it, the rising value of homes, and with that, the resources people used to pay for kitchens. My business evaporated.