

[Nobody sent him, but he still did good](#)

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Many Chicagoans are familiar with the phrase, “We don’t want nobody nobody sent,” the classic stone wall blow-off that newcomers receive when trying to get their foot in the door for a job or political office. It means both: a) Who the heck are you? and b) Scram.

Some even know Milton Rakove used it as the title of his oral history of the Daley years.

But few realize who was on the receiving end of that invitation to get lost, as a 22-year-old hoping to get involved in politics. His name is Abner Mikva, and he turns 85 today.

Mikva’s resume would fill three columns, so I’ll give you the short version — active in all three branches of government, he was a representative in Springfield and Washington, a federal judge for 25 years and White House counsel under Bill Clinton. He always had an eye for new talent — he gave a clerkship to future Supreme Court justice Elena Kagan and tried to hire as office help another up-and-comer, Barack Obama, but was turned down.

There’s much more — college professor, movie actor — but you get the idea. Last year the New York Times called Mikva “the Zelig of the American legal scene” and a website printed a complex chart of his connections.

One of the many idealists drawn to Mikva was Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Evanston) who got her start ringing doorbells for Mikva.

“When people talk about what should be the standard in public service, Abner Mikva’s name comes up among Republicans, Democrats, Independents,” she said. “He’s that kind of person, known for his integrity.”

Schakowsky cited the Mikva Challenge, a program to get teens excited about politics, named in honor of Mikva and his wife Zoe.

“He clearly takes this role as mentor and role model very, very seriously,” she said.

Mikva prudently winters in Florida, where I caught up with him over the telephone. I began by noting that his Mikva Challenge provided high school students to quiz the top four Chicago mayoral candidates.

“The kids were just great,” Mikva said. I observed that his students seemed more on-the-ball than the candidates themselves.

“They sure did,” he said. “Much more candid about what they had on their minds.”

One doesn’t doubt Mikva’s word lightly, but when he called himself a “retired judge” I scoffed, unable to see him playing bingo (though he is known for his poker skill).

“I still do work,” he said, “as an arbitrator and a mediator. I try to keep my hand in things.”

That initial rebuff from a ward heeler may have set the tone for Mikva's career.

"One of the enduring legacies for Abner Mikva is the grassroots campaigns that have become so common," Schakowsky said. "He figured out the formula for organizing the nobodies, and he's still at it."

In Rakove's book, the Milwaukee-born Mikva, "fired up from the Students for Douglas and Stevenson" visits the 8th Ward Regular Democratic Organization one day in 1948.

"I came in and said that I wanted to help," Mikva said. "Dead silence. 'Who sent you?' the committeeman said. I said, 'Nobody.' He said, 'We don't want nobody nobody sent.' Then he said, 'We ain't got no jobs.' I said, 'I don't want a job.' He said, 'We don't want nobody that don't want a job. Where are you from anyway?' I said, 'University of Chicago.' He said, 'We don't want nobody from the University of Chicago in this organization.' "

If this insular, tribal logic sounds familiar, it's the same "You don't belong here stay out" rhetoric we're still hearing in 2011 in our mayoral campaign, where the former president of the United States can be dismissed as "an outsider" and told to keep away from Chicago because we don't want no outsiders here.

The us vs. them mind-set was never an attitude that Abner Mikva would dabble in.

"He's someone who is in politics for exactly the right reasons," said Schakowsky. "Because he really wants to do something. It was never his goal just to be something."

I had to ask Mikva how he could be involved in Chicago politics over the span of seven decades and never become corrupted.

"Mostly luck," he said. "That's what I claim is my main title — 'More years in public service unindicted than anybody else.' I did it all. It was fun. I wouldn't trade a day of it."

Yet he seemed grateful to be pulling back.

“It’s not quite as much fun these days.”

Why?

“The money thing,” he said. “It was bad enough when I was there. Now it’s so much worse.”
Fund-raising, he said, hurts politics.

Mikva said that our current political discord is a nadir in our history comparable to McCarthyism or the various Red scares.

“We go through these low points where we end up fighting each other instead of realizing what we have in common,” Mikva said. “We come out of them, and we will come out of this one. I just hope it’s soon.”

You and me both, your honor, you and me both. Happy Birthday.

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