

## At 90, Byrne still has stories to tell

Sally Friedman

Brendan Byrne

Posted: Sunday, December 7, 2014, 1:09 AM

A few days ago, I rushed to embrace Brendan T. Byrne, the former New Jersey governor, at the Rutgers-New Brunswick Eagleton Institute of Politics.

I ate it up when he told me how pretty I looked - no matter that a sudden rain had soaked my hair and my blouse. I still love it when Brendan dishes out the blarney. And at 90, he does it astoundingly well.

The event was a standing-room-only reception and book signing to celebrate the publication of biographer Donald Linky's *New Jersey Governor Brendan Byrne: The Man Who Couldn't Be Bought*. The 303-page book covers Byrne's life and career, starting with his Irish immigrant family's beginnings.

If you're of a certain age, or are a student of New Jersey history, you may recall that Byrne was vilified as "One-term Byrne" because he had the political audacity to inaugurate a state income tax. So his reelection has been dubbed by some as the greatest political comeback in New Jersey history.

So what was I doing there? I'm definitely not a politician, nor was I there as a reporter.

Here's the backstory:

The first time I heard the name Brendan Byrne was in the mid-1960s. My husband, then a young lawyer, had come home from arguing a case before the state Board of Public Utilities, where Byrne served as president. Vic was raving about how brilliant Byrne was. "This guy is going to make it big," my husband told me.

It didn't really register. I had three toddlers who took up most of my available attention.

But less than a decade later, in 1973, that name came up again, and Vic was taking credit for his prophecy: Brendan Byrne had been elected governor in a landslide. We had no idea at the time how important he would become in our lives.

From early in his legal career, Vic's dream had been to become a judge. And Gov. Byrne made that dream come true by signing off on my husband's appointment to state Superior Court. Somewhere, we probably still have the document that made it official. Thus began the 22 proudest, most satisfying years of my husband's professional life.

And that might have been that. But it wasn't.

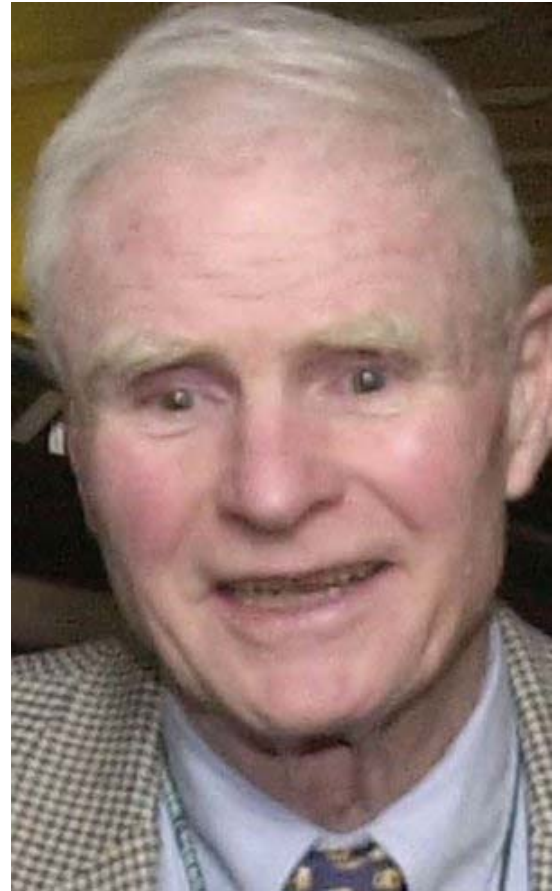
In the randomness of fate, our youngest daughter, Nancy, had met, fallen in love with, and married her college sweetheart, Michael Zinn. Standing under the wedding canopy at Nancy and Michael's wedding was Brendan Byrne.

By then, Michael's mother, Ruthi, and Brendan, each previously married, had met, fallen in love, and were heading for marriage. A year later, it was Vic who performed their wedding ceremony - and signed their certificate of marriage.

There it was - fate again. Two documents, two signatures, and these two men had helped change each other's lives.

Over the last two decades, we have all grown older together and shared many milestones.

Before long, we were all celebrating the births of Nancy and Michael's three sons, and the two sons of Michael's sister. We were a Jewish-Irish clan, with Brendan doing the Irish honors. There he was at our Passover seders, birthday parties, and every New Year's Eve, when together we rang out the old year and welcomed the new, often with Brendan bursting into song and eating too many sweets. His addiction to chocolate is legendary.



One of our greatest joys has been in sharing grandchildren. Brendan has made Sam, Jonah, and Danny Zinn his coconspirators in sneaking candy from his hidden stashes. He has shared some of his "cool stuff," as Danny calls it, including his collection of Hess trucks and pictures of Grandpa Brendan with famous people. Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter are personal friends.

Admittedly, our friends are a bit less celebrated. And then there's the stiff competition we face when we take our grandkids to the circus or ball games. Shockingly, we don't sit in the governor's box, as they do when they're with Grandpa Brendan in North Jersey.

When they were younger, the boys were heartbroken that they were missing the perks that came with that box. With us, down here in the Philly area, they just had to settle for the cheap seats and a hot dog, not a catered presentation.

Nevertheless, we've come to love Brendan - and not because he once was governor. It's the other things, what Jonah calls Grandpa Brendan's "knowing stuff." Like history. Literature. Political sagas. Songs that nobody else knows.

And oh yes, his wide and vast storehouse of humor. Brendan's hilarious stories, anecdotes, and one-liners are endless. He remains a sought-after speaker, and he still knows how to work a room - and a microphone.

Linky ends his biography with one of Brendan's classic lines about his goals in life. Aside from aiming to be the first New Jersey governor to reach 100, Brendan famously notes, "I want to be buried in Jersey City, so I can remain active in politics."

Way to go, B.B.

---

Sally Friedman writes from Moorestown.

[pinegander@aol.com](mailto:pinegander@aol.com)