

Pizazz Man

2398 words

I've always admired anyone who fully develops their talents, both personal and professional, one who serves others perhaps at their own peril, one who suffers failure or criticism then pushes forward with conviction and good humor. The person who comes to mind most often is my Uncle Vic. Vic did everything with pizazz. As a child I did not know his whole story. As a teenager I knew him better. As an adult, I continue to be amazed by his story. In his time, he was the most famous orchestra leader on the west coast. He was also known as the most jovial and memorable politician in Washington State. I knew him as a generous family man.

Victor Aloysius Meyers was born in Little Falls, Minnesota September 7, 1897. His future career seemed directed at a young age by genetics and birth order. He was the fifteenth of sixteen children. His father was a civil servant for many years. His mother played the piano. By age ten he learned to play the drums. Soon he learned to play several other instruments. His family moved to the west coast and Vic studied in and graduated from the McLaughlin Institute in Oregon City – a Catholic school founded by the “Father of Oregon”. Perhaps he was also influenced by McLaughlin's dynamism. As a teen, he got paying gigs Seaside, Oregon. By age 21, Vic 's full orchestra earned popularity for their musical syncopated swing at the del Coronado Hotel in San Diego. Pizazz.

His musical and business genius earned his orchestra a two-year billing in the Rose Room Ballroom of the Butler Hotel (located at Second and James Streets), then Seattle's finest hosting national political and entertainment dignitaries including presidents, generals and movie stars

among them President Truman, President Roosevelt, Will Rogers, Bing Crosby and Buffalo Bill. It was about this time that Vic married Goldie Irene Pitcher, my father's sister and a vivacious redhead who supported Vic's every adventure.

Early in the America's musical industry there were three major recording studios all based in the east coast: RCA, Columbia and Brunswick. In 1923, Brunswick Records took a west coast tour, noticed Uncle Vic's Orchestra and recorded several records by it. Around that time, Vic co-wrote three songs "Ada", "I'm Happy Now That You're Gone", and "Isle of Dreams". He took his group on tour around Washington State. They soon became the most popular orchestra and he the best leader on the west coast. He was recognizable by his pencil-thin mustache, patent shoes and ever present cigar. He would often call either friend or critic an endearing, "Kiddo", thwack them on the back and chirp a humorous quip.

While in Spokane, Vic met Harry Lillis "Bing" Crosby and his Rhythm Boys who were just starting out. In 1925 Bing came to Seattle and auditioned with Vic's band and that of Jackie Soutor. Soutor had previously played trombone for Vic, but at that time had his own band. Bing was told he did too much crooning and that he should find another line of work. The critique was blamed on the respective ballroom managers. In his autobiography, Bing blamed Soutor's manager; some historians blamed the Butler Hotel manager. After Bing's success he and Vic got together for a laugh over the incident.

From the Butler Hotel, Vic's orchestra took a national tour and recorded with Columbia Records. By many critics, his was deemed better dance music than Paul Whiteman's or Guy Lombardo's. In 1927 Vic's Orchestra moved to Seattle's Trianon Ballroom (Third and Wall Street) and in 1932 into his own club, The Club Victor (Fourth and Denny Regrade area). This

was the speakeasy era and although prohibition was the law, liquor was still available. Whenever the “Liquor Squad” was headed to the door, Vic humorously directed the orchestra to play “How Dry I Am.” Managers were frequently arrested for serving alcohol, but many customers also left to visits to their cars where they enjoyed nips. Vic's orchestra was widely popular with young people particularly the university crowds. His orchestra was also the first to make live radio recordings in Seattle. In the mid 1930s Vic's manager, Ted Harris hired my father as doorman at Club Victor. It was there my father met my mother.

Vic's frequent witticisms and self-deprecating humor brought needed relief during the depression era. In 1932 Uncle Vic's notoriety caught the attention of several newsmen who challenged him to inject distraction and fun into Seattle's mayoral race. Vic always enjoyed publicity so agreed. He threw himself into the effort and at a Shriner's luncheon showed up as a guru garbed in a sheet and top hat. He towed a goat in one hand and held an ever present cigar in the other. He drank goat's milk and played a flute. In his campaign speeches he jokingly advocated two-four time over daylight time. To prove he was against waste, he advocated placing potted plants around fire hydrants to collect leaks. He outrageously advocated a city gigolo. Also hostesses and ice water on city streetcars. Exemplifying his eccentricities, he hired movie actress Laura LaPlante to pose on a streetcar and to be his campaign manager. He would proclaim, “I won't tell any lies about my opponent if he won't tell the truth about me.” Though prohibition continued, he rode a beer wagon through the streets while his band played “Happy Days Are Here Again.”

He lost the Seattle mayoral election, but that year was also was election season for state offices. Encouraged by his tremendous previous support, Vic headed to the state capitol in

Olympia to run for the office of Governor. He was told the filing fee was \$60, but he only had \$20. Learning that filing for Lieutenant Governor was only \$12 he said he'd take it, even if he couldn't spell it. He would often say that he came within \$48 of becoming Governor.

In 1932 Vic, joined Washington State Senator Clarence Dill, Seattle's Mayor John Dore and lawyer (and future senator) Warren Magnuson to campaign with visiting Franklin D. Roosevelt. In his own race, Vic campaigned both seriously (speaking for Indian voting rights, child welfare, pensions and unemployment) and humorously (playing his saxophone in lieu of campaign speeches). He was at the Trianon in the middle of a song when someone announced he had won – being swept in with FDR's landslide victory. He excitedly left the orchestra to another's direction and headed hurriedly off to Democratic headquarters. Later his orchestra played at his inauguration ball.

Soon voters and fans found that Vic could wield that gavel as well as the baton. He was previously unfamiliar with parliamentary procedure, but he was a quick study and became a master at it. He was known nationally for his skill, fairness and flair. Part of his duty was to head the senate and he chaired the Senate Rules Committee for twenty years. It was the most powerful in the state's history. He would sometimes end a vociferous argument or stalemate with one of his one-liners. Many of his jokes and antics caused reporters to dub him the “Clown Prince” and “Pagliacci” of politics.

Voters re-elected Vic four more times as Lieutenant Governor. Throughout the depression years Vic championed issues of social justice: worker's rights; prisoner rights; decent housing; and anti-racism. Once, when protesters marched through the streets seeking jobs, other politicians ignored them. Uncle Vic invited them to his home to talk.

Vic served under 5 different governors. He was always a progressive democrat. Governor Martin was a centrist. They differed often. Once, when Martin was away, Vic grabbed the chance to serve as Governor pro tem and tried to pass a favored project involving state worker pensions. Alerted to the governor's absence, Vic—on a fishing vacation in California—dashed back to Olympia via boat, plane, train and car, even a state patrol escort to call a special session. The bill was almost passed when, hearing of it, Martin rushed back to Olympia with equal speed and squashed the effort. Martin could never again vacation out of state while Vic was in office.

In 1935 Vic was among the group of dignitaries and reporters who stood on the shore of Lake Washington bidding farewell to Wiley Post and Will Rogers. Just days later their plane crashed in Alaska.

Uncle Vic had many creative visions. Not all played out. He advocated the World's Fair in Seattle in the 1930s (did not happen until 1962) and trees lining 5th Avenue (partially happened much later). But one did. After spending four years on the Advisory Board for Parks Committee, Vic actively pursued another ideal—to develop a state park in eastern Washington. Though pooh-poohed by many as “Vic's folly”, Vic, fought hard for the development of Sun Lakes State Park south of Grand Coulee Dam. Vic, family and supporters personally loaded the state Cadillac with fertilizer, 2X4s, and tools, drove from Olympia to the site, rolled up their shirtsleeves and set to task. Eventually, his efforts were rewarded. Today Sun Lakes-Dry Lakes State Park is one of the most popular in the state. One can still visit Meyers Lake and Vic Meyers Golf Course.

During his tenure as Lt. Governor (for which he repeatedly complained about the low

salary), he authored a booklet, "Historic Highlights" summarizing Washington State history from the Spanish explorers to the present. Vic started a prefabricated house business with his brother Joseph Meyers and State Senator Howard Bargreen. Sometimes called "GI Honeymoon homes," they remained part of the Pacific Northwest landscape for years. He also ran twice again for Seattle's mayor, each time losing. Eventually, he was voted out of office in 1952 with the Eisenhower landslide.

In 1955 Vic had major surgery for bowel cancer and recovered, albeit with a colostomy. Always the public servant, in 1956 he filed for the office of Washington's Secretary of State. On the form asking *Occupation*, he wrote, "former bandmaster, former Lieutenant Governor, formerly unemployed." In his campaigning he told voters "A while back I asked you to help old Vic out. Now I'm asking you to help Vic back in." He won and was re-elected a second term in 1960.

The duty of the Secretary of State was (still is) to maintain voter registration. It was during this period that I worked in his office as one of about 50 file clerks who checked each voter's signature on every single ballot, initiative, referendum or petition carefully against their registration card. Vic was fair in his hiring practices and many of my co-workers were minorities or disabled.

After day shift, I helped Aunt Goldie at home. At night I shared a bedroom with my cousin Mary Louise. Weekends, I bused home to Seattle. I continued this routine for three summers. Vic's willingness (and I never doubted it was at Aunt Goldie's recommendation) and that job enabled me to go to the University of Washington.

Vic, ever the family man, also employed Mary Louise as his secretary and his son Vic Jr.

as adviser midst much scrutiny. Victor A. Meyers Jr. proved his ability by serving as State Representative 1958–1960. Uncle Vic also endured criticism for excessive expenditures, use of telephone calls and state cars, and eventually nepotism. In his defense, Vic would quip “Why pick on Vic?” implying it was common practice. The controversy was doused when he was supported by Democrat Governor Albert Rossellini who called Vic “a good man”.

Vic left much of the Secretary's job to subordinates and took on an unofficial role as the state's ambassador of good will occasionally traveling outside the state. Who else could do it with such pizzazz? And he frequently generously greeted capitol visitors. Once, my younger brother's Seattle grade school class toured the capitol. Uncle Vic surprised him by recognizing him by name, pulling him forward and putting his hands on John's shoulders. John brimmed with pride and pleasure. And vindication; John's teacher had not believed him when he announced that the Secretary of State was his uncle.

I happened to be at his home right after Sputnik was launched, in 1957. Uncle Vic ushered everyone out on the lawn and pointed it out. He was busy man and expected those around him to match his energy. At home he would often give me three tasks at once, then added, “While you're resting Kiddo, bring me another cigar.” (endearing smile added). To this day I love the smell of cigars (though I hate cigarettes). His household was a hubbub of activity always preparing for the next dinner party with a senator, government meeting, business trip or conference.

On June 21, 1963 thieves broke into a vault in the office of the Secretary of State and stole an anti-gambling petition with 82,955 signatures. The theft, called the “Great Petition Robbery”, was never solved even though the newspapers referred to the thieves as Shorty and

Fiddleface. The scandal worked against Vic, though certainly fault should have been directed against the Capitol Police. That, plus criticism over nepotism ended his political career. He was not re-elected in 1964.

After 1964 Vic went back to band leading and worked for a while in the State Land Office. He filed for Secretary of State again in 1976 citing the need for money, but withdrew for health reasons. My Aunt Goldie died in 1976. He had a try – though unsuccessfully – with a corn farm and a chicken farm. He continued public commitment as a member of the Elks, Eagles, Lions and Knights of Columbus.

Uncle Vic, and Mary Louise retired to Kent, Washington where he managed a golf course. His health gradually declined. His memory began to fade, but not his humor. In 1986 he moved into Mount St. Vincent's Home in West Seattle. In 1989 he was inducted into the Northwest Music Association Hall of Fame. In 1990 the staff of St. Vincent's, friends and family gave him Celebration of Life party at which his music was played to an aging crowd. His old friend and manager, Phil Harris was there as were Vic's grandchildren. Vic died there in 1991.

Victor A. Meyers is remembered by some as the most famous west coast depression and prohibition era orchestra leader, one of the nation's most effective parliamentarians, and Washington State's most humorous politician. When I remember, him I think: *Pizazz!*