

2020-11-17-Don Bonker Podcast Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DON BONKER: So young people entering office have got to have a good sense of who they are, because that's going to shape who they will be in public life rather than all these other forces out there which are powerful.

RHONDA MORIN: US Representative Don Bonker speaks from experience. He learned a lot about himself during his more than two decades in elected office, 14 of which was when he represented Washington state's 3rd Congressional District. Prior to that, he'd been in the Coast Guard and then he taught the foxtrot as a dance instructor in New Orleans.

In the early 1960s, when he moved to Southwest Washington to reunite with his estranged father, he enrolled at Clark College which radically changed his path in life. Bonker, who is a past recipient of Clark College Foundation's Outstanding Alumni Award, has a new book called *A Higher Calling, Faith And Politics In The Public Square*. He co-wrote the book with the now late journalist, David Applefield.

The memoir doesn't just catalog his career as a politician. Instead, Bonker weaves in serendipitous episodes he's had with some of the most powerful people at that time, from presidents Jimmy Carter to George H. Bush, to House Speaker Tom Foley and Representative Tom Lantos. Bonker was a member of the class of 1974, where 75 newly elected members of Congress ushered in a populist mood in the wake of Watergate. In this edition of Penguin Chats, a Clark College Foundation production, we'll talk to Bonker about some of those moments and the profound effect Clark had on his career.

Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Horenstein Law Group, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Americh Massena, Quail Homes, and US Bank. Our platinum and gold donors are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

DON BONKER: When people ask me how I started my political career, it goes back to my first week at Clark College. And when I came out to go to college at Clark, he was worried I wouldn't stay around. So he encouraged me to go to a get acquainted dance first Friday that year.

[MUSIC - "AIN'T SHE SWEET"]

RHONDA MORIN: Following the advice from his father, Bonker did go to that dance. But as a dance instructor, he was shocked at what he saw on the dance floor.

DON BONKER: It was all about the waltz, the foxtrot, the cha cha cha, traditional dancing. But I walked into the room, at the dance, get acquainted dance, and I saw all these hipsters twists and turns, up and down, arms flowing everywhere, people not dancing together. And I must have made some comments along the way, because eventually I was confronted by this male student who was antagonistic.

And he kept punching my chest. And he said, if you don't like the music get out of here. Do something else.

And I was gracious and backed away. I didn't want confrontation. But I could see where it was going. So I threw a punch. He went down.

Somebody approached me and said, you better get out of here. He's got some friends. They're not going to like this.

RHONDA MORIN: Bonker fled the dance. But at his father's urging, he went back to fess up to the incident.

DON BONKER: We have to report to the Dean of Students, Manny Nelson was his name, the Dean of Students, on Monday morning. And so we arrived. And he turned to the other fellow, and he put him on probation because he had been drinking. And then he turned to me and he said, young man, if you want to change the music around here, you march across that hallway and get involved in student government. That's how we change things here.

And that's how I got involved in student government and the early steps to my political career. The next year I ran for student body president. And it came down to two of us. And The Penguin newspaper, the Friday before, had the front page with a big photo of my opponent and me, our little platforms under the photo. The only problem is they had my name under his photo and his name under my photo. So I lost the election and blamed the newspaper.

RHONDA MORIN: Skip ahead to 1966, when at age 29, Bonker ran for his first elected office as Clark County auditor. He nearly dropped out of that race thinking his chances were slim against his opponent. But once again, his father had something to say about that.

DON BONKER: And so I went in to see the chairman of the Democratic Party, whose name was David Lashar. I was young and he was a father-like figure. And we had a little pleasant exchange. And I finally notified him, Mr. Chairman, I'm here to inform you I'm going to run for Clark County auditor, feeling some pride in that decision.

And he was a little puzzled and paused a little bit. And then said, I don't think that's a good idea. And I persisted. And I said, well, I've left everything to come out here and do this. I've already made my decision.

He said it's not a good decision. I don't think you should run for that office. I have a candidate already for that office. And I persisted again.

And then he finally said, young man, if you run for that office I personally will guarantee that your career is over before it ends. So I'm in my car driving back to my father's house thinking, what on earth am I doing? I can't run for this office. I have to think about something else.

And I drove into the driveway and hopped out of the car. His wife, I said, where's Dad? She said, oh, he's out in the back doing something. And I walked out to the backyard.

And all I could see were Don Bonker for county auditor signs spread everywhere. He had spent all day painting these signs. And I paused and thought, I am going to have to run for this office, despite what that party chairman said.

[LAUGHS]

RHONDA MORIN: Well, he got elected as auditor and served in that role through 1974. After that, Bonker ran and was elected to the US House of Representatives, a seat he was re-elected to six times. He attempted to run for Senate twice, actually, but wasn't successful. Bonker's the first Clark College graduate to serve in the US House. Representative Denny Heck is the second. There are many stories in Bonker's book that give a behind the scenes look of a politician at work, like this little gem.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DON BONKER: So in the House side, the Rayburn Building has a pretty nice gym where congressmen come and work out, do a swim, whatever. And we all have locker rooms. And so in my locker, somebody had given me a bottle of shaving lotion. It was a Paris type shaving lotion, a full bottle, maybe 12 ounces or something. But I didn't particularly like it. So it just sat there, unused.

But I noticed that it started going down. And pretty soon was empty. And obviously, we didn't lock our lockers, but somebody was taking it. So between Christmas and New Years I went into the gym to get some exercise, and I opened my locker, and there was a new bottle of shaving lotion and a note. A little card said, Vice President of the United States, George Bush. And his little message was confess, I'm the one who's been stealing your lotion. I want to start the new year in a right way. So here is a replacement.

RHONDA MORIN: As a former Congressman, George H. Bush still had access to the gym during his vice presidency. Bonker, a Democrat, couldn't help but point out with a big smile that a member of the Republican Party had shorted him.

DON BONKER: And the only thing is the original bottle is 12 ounces. The replacement was 6 ounces.

RHONDA MORIN: In the current era of political polarization, where many Americans have lost trust in government, this is how Bonker sees the make up of our nation's elected leaders.

DON BONKER: When I served, two things, one is you looked at the political spectrum. 60% were moderate Democrats, moderate Republicans. There was pragmatism. There were good relationships. They had their differences but worked together.

20% was far right. 20% was far left. When you talk about the far right, far left, not much space for compromise. Because it's ideological versus being more pragmatic. Today, that center is probably about 20% moderate, and then 40% on the right, 40% on the left.

The second thing was civility. When I served, whether it was Democrat or Republican in leadership or not, there was civility that enabled people to get beyond their political differences to serve in the best interests of the nation. And we saw that by way of Tom Foley, who is from Washington state, the speaker, and Bob McMillan, who is from Illinois, the Republican, in the minority.

And they worked together. And we accomplished so much. In fact, when Tom Foley had his ceremony, his tribute after his death, the most lovely tribute of all his friends and very famous people, was that minority leader.

RHONDA MORIN: Bonker says Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are in different camps and act more like tribal leaders.

DON BONKER: It's making it more difficult to come together, to reconcile our differences, to rise above those differences, and to do what's in the common good for the nation. So the real question is whether this is a new path forward, or is this just another episode in America's history, and next year and beyond we'll get our act back together?

RHONDA MORIN: One of the ways that Bonker fortified his relationships while serving in the House is by attending a weekly fellowship group with his political rivals. This is where four men came together each week without fail for 10 years. They transcended their differences by putting politics aside and entered into an hour of support, grace, and prayer. But it was more about relationships and how our shared faith could have us rise to a higher calling, if you will.

And Senator Mark Hatfield was chairman of the Rules Committee, very powerful. And he had a lovely office in the Capitol. And he allowed us to meet there weekly.

So that's what we did. And we built a very close relationship, not only the congressmen, but our wives as well. And we would not talk about issues. When we entered the door, we put all those policy issues on the doorstep. It was about our families and about other struggles we had in life. And we would pray for one another.

As we got to be closer and closer, we went to the Middle East together. We traveled in other places. We did meet faithfully. We made sure our office knew that was a priority.

And 40 years later, almost 50 years later now, we still get together. We are still in close communication. So it was something I never expected when I arrived in Washington, DC, but it certainly had a huge impact on my life.

RHONDA MORIN: Bonker was young when he was tapped as chair of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Human Rights. It was while serving in this role that another serendipitous moment occurred. He met a major donor at a party one night and was invited to then meet someone from Sweden the next day. Turns out he met a member of the wealthy Wallenberg family.

DON BONKER: The Wallenberg family in Sweden is like the Rockefeller family here. They owned almost 50% of the GDP. And they're very powerful.

But his cousin was Raoul Wallenberg who, during the war, was stationed in Hungary. And as the Germans entered and started capturing and killing the Jewish, his mission was to protect as many Jews as he could, fake passports, and all sorts of things. And so he saved something like 20, 30,000.

But after the war, he was still there. But somehow was arrested by the Russians. And he disappeared. And so for 20 years, the Wallenberg family, the Swedish government, they were trying to find him.

RHONDA MORIN: Eventually, Wallenberg asked Bonker to hold a hearing in the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee so that the State Department would be encouraged to act on his cousin's disappearance. Bonker did set up that meeting. And along the way, made a connection with Annette Lantos, the wife of Tom Lantos, who was leading an effort to find Wallenberg. At the time, Lantos was running for a seat in Congress. After being elected, Lantos went on to be what Bonker calls an icon for human rights.

DON BONKER: Even though I was chairman of that committee when he arrived, he became the voice for human rights.

RHONDA MORIN: There was another influential person who Bonker worked with on human rights.

DON BONKER: I remember on human rights, it was Jimmy Carter I worked with closely. Because he wanted to make human rights integral to our foreign policy. Before, if a dictator in South America was our benefit, fine. But we were making human rights more integral. And that's where we started The Human Rights Report. I was involved with that.

RHONDA MORIN: Environmental policy was another focus. Bonker was keenly aware of the balance between keeping timber jobs and preserving forests in his district. He frequently worked with local elected officials to identify lands that needed federal protection. One area he remembers fondly is a place near Long Beach Ilwaco, an area that's filled with sought after cedar trees. The federal government owned the Long Island land and a private company, Weyerhaeuser, harvested the trees.

DON BONKER: Even though the federal government, or whatever the arrangement - so I thought, OK, maybe we can negotiate an exchange of forest timberland somewhere else for that area. So it involved a lot of negotiation. Ultimately, we had to put in \$5 million to make the deal happen. But we saved the cedar grove, it's called the Long Island Cedars.

RHONDA MORIN: For his efforts, a hiking trail is dedicated to him in the area. It's known as the Don Bonker Cedar Grove Trail in Long Island. Bonker feels he was called to public service. For Clark students and alumni either thinking or currently involved in politics, he has this bit of advice.

DON BONKER: Young people entering office have got to have a good sense of who they are, because that's going to shape who they will be in public life rather than all these other forces out there, which are powerful. Because if you don't enter public office with values, ascetic convictions, principles that guide not only where you go, positions you take, but who you are as an individual, if you don't have those values, then you are going to be vulnerable to the political influencers, the special interests. They are out there.

[MUSIC - "AIN'T SHE SWEET"]

Back to Clark College, fond memories that had a lot to do with shaping who I am, because I had to transition from this dance studio fantasy land to getting serious about life and being reshaped of who I am. And the people I associated with at Clark College, the professors at the time, whether I was giving them dancing lessons or not, and the community, eventually, as a county official, those are the early years that probably shape a lot of who you are. So I feel a sense of gratitude to Clark College and my early days in Clark County.

RHONDA MORIN: There are many more similar stories in the book. The memoir is called *A Higher Calling, Faith And Politics In The Public Square*. It's available online. Or go to our website, ClarkCollegeFoundation.org, to read more about the former representative.

Thank you for listening to Penguin Chats. I'm Rhonda Morin.

CREW: Penguin Chat is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Horenstein Law Group, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Americh Massena, Quail Homes, and US Bank. Our platinum and gold donors are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.