

Developing patience for Falls' future

Several years ago, I met a man whose reputation and company's persona preceded him. At that point, all I knew about him and the company he represented was what I had heard around town and what had been published in the local papers about them. I promptly proceeded to throw his \$500 shoes and \$1,000 suit off my property.

Having what some people describe as an "aggressive" or "confrontational" personality (usually the people in the \$500 shoes and \$1,000

suits), I decided that this was not going to be

good enough for me. I was determined to find out everything I could about this perceived threat to my city and community and expose them for the carpet-bagging frauds they were. Over the next several years, I accumulated a large amount of information about who they were, what threat they represent, who they support and who supported them.

This is where the story begins to get ugly. The more I spoke to people who actually had face-to-face dealing with them, the more I began to realize that this perceived threat was more fabrication than realization. What I discovered was just another very large and successful businessman just trying to do business in Niagara Falls. I believe he chose this city because of its untapped opportunities for economic development and the perception that Niagara Falls was ready to renaissance into its

past greatness and beyond.

Here's where it really gets tricky. Perception is not always reality. As a lifelong resident of Niagara Falls, other names begin to come to mind: Benderson; Ghermazian and Cordish, to name a few. All were very successful developers who had completed game-changing projects in some of the toughest areas in our great nation: Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit and Miami. All had left Niagara Falls scratching their heads wondering: "What is wrong with these people?"

Albert Einstein once said: "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." My question then is this: "Are we going to again repeat the insanity of our past decisions, or are we finally going to embrace and welcome the game-changing successful businessman who, despite our city officials' insanity, has refused to leave and has been working patiently and quietly behind the scenes for 15 years to make his investment and our city the success it can become despite itself?"

Fifteen years. Talk about insanity. The cost of ownership alone is staggering. The purchase price, the environmental issues, the demolitions and the maintenance in what was arguably the worst of our city neighborhoods, neglected and decayed beyond repair. Buildings and properties being maintained and demolished by city crew's taxpayers' expenses. Properties repeatedly showing up at tax auctions costing more taxpayer dollars. People have a tendency to forget

what that neighborhood had become before Niagara Falls Redevelopment. I, on the other hand, cannot forget because as a lifelong east side resident, I still live within walking distance of these properties, which are now maintained and secured better than most of our city's property at no taxpayer's expense. Properties that are now put back on the tax rolls, making Niagara Falls Redevelopment one of the city's largest taxpayers, to the tune of almost \$750,000 a year. Money that is now returning to the city's coffers.

It is easier to find fault with what has not been done with this property than to realize what this property has become under Niagara Falls Redevelopment's watch. That is, the largest accumulation of developable contiguous property in Niagara Falls. This property is the key to what Niagara Falls will become. It is easier to take fault with the person for what he has not done rather than praise what he has accomplished. What most people don't know is that in his 15 years of insanity here in Niagara Falls, Howard Milstein, through his company and representatives, has also been reaching out to the community organizations and charities. His continued support has been critical to helping these organizations reach their goals and helping some of our neediest residents.

These acts of community service go unnoticed because that is what Milstein wants. I know of these actions because as president of the Niagara Street Business Association, which represents one of our city's

poorest neighborhoods we have called upon his representatives to help on several occasions. Not once have they been too busy to return our phone calls. Not once have they been too busy to see us. Not once have they been unsympathetic to the needs of our community. Roger and Tony have had only one request from us, which is that we not name them as our helpers and benefactors. This was requested because their company believes that, as a part of our community, it is their responsibility to give back and to help where they can without praise and recognition.

Perhaps it's time for all the organizations they have helped over the years to speak up and stand next to them for what they have done in our community rather than to criticize them for what they have not yet been able to accomplish.

Mr. Milstein, in a city where we feel the need to pay people to live here for two years to boost economic development 15 years can seem like more than a lifetime. But we want you to know that we, too, have been waiting our lifetime for change, and that one stubborn, successful businessman who can make Niagara Falls successful, in spite of itself. Mr. Milstein, because of individuals like you and your representatives, Tony and Roger, we know that change will come.

Thank you for your belief and continued support.

Jim Szwedo is president and Ron Anderluh is economic development coordinator for the Niagara Street Business Association

GUEST VIEW

JIM

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