

BERNIE SANDERS

THE VOICE FOR THE PEOPLE

For eight years socialist Mayor Bernie Sanders has lit up Burlington politics like a firebomb. The fuse runs back through a theater in Chicago to a three-room apartment in Brooklyn.



JYM WILSON, Free Press

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The whole movie rattled Bernie Sanders. But the scene that got him the most was when Willy Loman, a failing traveling salesman, went in to his boss to ask to be taken off the road and given an office job.

The boss is busy playing with his new tape recorder. Loman should get one, he says. "Supposing you wanna hear Jack Benny, see? But you can't be at home at that hour. So you tell the maid to turn the radio on when Jack Benny comes on, and this automatically goes on with the radio. ... You can come home 12:00, 1:00, any time you like, and you get yourself a Coke and sit yourself down, throw the switch, and there's Jack Benny's program in the middle of the night."

Sanders, a University of Chicago student, wanted to scream. What did that boss know about Willy Loman's struggle to keep food on the table? What did he know about Loman's fears about nearing retirement and having no money to rely on? How dare he suggest Loman spend two weeks salary on a toy.

The movie was an adaptation of Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman," a tragedy depicting the downfall of a common man. For Sanders, the man who would become Burlington's ranting and raving socialist mayor, it hit too close to home.

The movie was set in New York City, where Sanders grew up. He was born Sept. 8, 1941 in Brooklyn to Polish immigrant Eli Sanders and his wife, Dorothy. Like

Three months from now, the man whose election was called a fluke leaves office. Staff writer Mary Ann Lickteig talked with those who worked with, worked against or simply watched Bernie Sanders over the years. This is the first of a two-part report.

Loman, Eli Sanders was a salesman. Both men had two sons. Neither had enough money.

Lack of wealth was something Larry and Bernie Sanders didn't realize until they went to college and saw how other people lived. There was always food in the Sanders' house and heat.

There was money. But there was just enough money. If there was ever any extra, it sparked arguments. Dorothy Sanders wanted to go on a vacation for a couple of weeks. Eli worried about how much that would cost.

Tension held up the walls of the tiny apartment like centrifugal force, everything revolving around money. Larry Sanders resolved to never get too concerned about wealth. Bernie still buys discount tennis shoes.

Likes a good fight

It is 12:30 p.m. on a Friday. Mayor Sanders was supposed to be at Memorial Auditorium to play basketball at noon, but a meeting with school officials ran long. They wanted a 15 1/2-cent tax rate increase, and Sanders wanted a good explanation.

Reforming taxes to shift the burden to big companies was on Sanders' agenda years before he became



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Bernard Sanders, 1989.

mayor. The budget shouldn't be balanced on the backs of working people, he says.

He pushed a resolution that would have eliminated property taxes for low-income senior citizens. Voters overwhelmingly approved it, but it was shot down by the Legislature. That still gets Sanders mad.

The theme of his administration, the reason he knocked on every door in the city in 1981, has been to tell people that government

can work for them. They can challenge the two-party system and stand up to the ruling class.

And people listened. Voter turnout swelled to record levels when Sanders was on the ballot.

So when the people say, "Yes, we want the tax structure changed," and then the Legislature stands in the way, Sanders gets frustrated.

Turn to SANDERS, 4A



Nov. 24, 1971



Nov. 2, 1976



Dec. 6, 1982



June 8, 1982



Oct. 4, 1988

Through the years

- Sept. 8, 1941: Bernie Sanders is born in Brooklyn, N.Y.
- 1964: Sanders graduates from the University of Chicago with a bachelor's degree in political science.

- Jan. 7, 1972: Sanders is the Liberty Union candidate in a special election for U.S. Senate. "As for my qualifications, I am not a politician," Sanders says. He gets 1,571 votes, or 2 percent.

- Nov. 7, 1972: Sanders is the Liberty Union candidate for governor. He gets 2,175 votes, or 1 percent.
- Nov. 5, 1974: Sanders is the Liberty Union candidate for U.S. Senate. He gets 5,901 votes.
- Nov. 2, 1976: Sanders is the Liberty Union candidate for governor. He receives 11,317 votes.

- March 3, 1981: Sanders beats five-term incumbent Gordon Paquette by 10 votes and becomes mayor of Burlington.
- March 1, 1983: Sanders wins re-election with 52 percent of the vote.
- March 5, 1985: Sanders is re-

- elected mayor with 55 percent of the vote.
- Nov. 4, 1986: Sanders runs for governor and wins 15 percent of the vote.
- March 3, 1987: Sanders is re-elected mayor with 55 percent of the vote.
- May 28, 1988: Sanders mar-

- ries Youth Office Director Jane Driscoll in a public ceremony at North Beach.
- Nov. 8, 1988: Sanders is an independent candidate for the U.S. House. He wins 38 percent of the vote, 3 percent less than Republican winner Peter Smith.

Sanders: The voice for the people

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All the battles steal time away from basketball, his early love. Walking to Memorial Auditorium, Sanders nods at people and waves at storefronts. This is the guy who scored six points against Connie Hawkins' team in elementary school and helped P.S. 197 win a borough championship.

But in the auditorium, Sanders misses a shot right below the basket. He rebounds and tries again. No one blocks him. No one even tries.

Two points. "Why did we let him have it twice?" scoffs George Thabault, the mayor's assistant.

Sanders would agree. There's nothing he likes more than a good fight.

Ten-vote margin

On March 4, 1981, the opposition was lined up against Sanders like a wall of 7-foot Michael Jordans.

Sanders had just snatched the Burlington mayor's seat from five-term incumbent Gordon Paquette with a 10-vote margin. He had been to two Board of Aldermen's meetings and one Planning Commission meeting in his life. He didn't know which streets made up which wards.

Young people who wore Bernie-for-mayor buttons and old people who toted Bernie-for-mayor shopping bags had catapulted him into City Hall, a Democratic fortress for the previous 16 years.

The first thing aldermen did was fire his secretary and reject six of his appointments.

"To say (it was) like Ronald Reagan having Jimmy Carter's Cabinet would be too soft. It would be more like having Daniel Ortega having the Contras as his advisers," Sanders said.

He had to whisper in his office because he didn't want the city clerk to hear what he was saying. Progressive thinkers, who volunteered to help Sanders, became his "shadow cabinet."

"My first budget was not put together in City Hall. It was put together at somebody's kitchen table," Sanders said.

Introduction to politics

Sanders' introduction to politics came at 1525 E. 26th St., Brooklyn, Apt. 2C. Larry Sanders, chairman of the Young Democrats at Brooklyn College, brought home friends to work on leaflets denouncing the abolition of a popularly elected student government. Young Bernie listened in.

The household had never been terribly political. But Eli Sanders had unwittingly laid the foundation when he showed his sons the family photo album, pointing out picture after picture of people killed in the Holocaust as he turned the pages.

"I don't think we had any sense that it was a safe world and that leaders could be counted on to do the right things," said Larry Sanders, now a social worker in Oxford, England.

Government, when it gets out of hand, can kill your loved ones. Bernie Sanders' first political

activity was running for student body president at James Madison High School. He finished third in a field of three. His platform was to raise money so students could adopt a Korean orphan. Despite his loss, a child was adopted.

After a year at Brooklyn College, Sanders transferred to the University of Chicago in 1961. There, in a basement library, his ideas began to ferment. He would spend 10 hours a day reading psychiatry, economics and socialism.

He led sit-in demonstrations against the school's segregated housing and applied for conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War.

Sanders came to Vermont in 1968. He ran in four statewide races — twice for governor and twice for U.S. Senate — as a Liberty Union candidate.

Although he calls himself a socialist, he never has joined a socialist party. "They are small groups of people who primarily talk to similar-minded people and are not going out and talking to the vast majority of Americans," he says. To him, socialism means "democracy. It means people's participation in running the government and control over their own lives. It means doing more than voting once every four years for a Bush or a Dukakis."

Who is Bernie Sanders?

Jane Driscoll was trying to make a point in Mayor Paquette's office. She was a community organizer, and the people she represented thought that the 65-cent tax increase Paquette wanted was irresponsible. She intended to let them do the talking, but there came a point when she couldn't sit still anymore and addressed the mayor herself.

After she complained that he was not answering her questions, Paquette said, "You sound just like Bernie Sanders."

"I sat down and I said, 'Who is Bernie Sanders?'" The people with her said, "This guy; he's running for mayor."

"So I said, 'We should have a debate.'"

At the forum, Driscoll was stunned. She was a divorced mother of three who was making \$40 a week more working than she would have on welfare. "I just remember him understanding what poverty was about, and most people don't," she said.

"There is no voice in City Hall for the kids and the elderly," Sanders would say. "They need to be heard."

That voice was elected. Ooooh, that voice.

One reporter early on said it had "somewhat of a Brooklyn accent."

No. That voice came barreling out of Flatbush, rounds of "cleuhly and tote-a-ly unacceptable" firing on a land of "jeezum crows."

Aimed at the "ruling-class institutions."

To the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont, the voice said, "Hey, you guys may be an excellent hospital in terms of the quality of

your health care. You are not a charitable institution."

To the University of Vermont, it said: "You may or may not be — and that is up in the air — a particularly good university. But certainly, in terms of your responsiveness to the needs of the people in this community, you have been absolutely negligent."

To the landlords, "You've been ripping off the tenants and the tenants deserve some protection." To developers, "Hey, you just can't come to the city and build anything you want any place you want." And to the Legislature, "Get out of the business of the city of Burlington."

Sanders called news conferences to blast the war in Nicaragua, to urge eradication of Third World hunger and to trounce the federal government's plan to increase arm sales abroad. Over the years, he has called for the resignation or firing of the state welfare commissioner, Vermont ETV's program director, a Burlington police commissioner, the Burlington police chief, the Burlington Electric Department manager, three members of the Vermont Public Service Board and the entire Legislature.

"I see it as demanding accountability," Sanders says. Government should work for the people.

Sanders is of the people. He has had his electricity turned off for not paying the bill — his phone, too. He's taken his car to five or six service stations to get an inspection sticker.

The year he was elected, his rusty Dasher was ticketed for being parked in the mayor's space. The first time he met Robert Stafford, Vermont's former U.S. senator, Sanders' glasses were held onto his head with a piece of string.

It's the working people whom Sanders seeks out and wins over.

"You know why so many working people smoke?" The mayor's voice is soft now, sounding for the first time like it is tired, worn smooth from crashing against issues over and over and over for the past eight years.

"Smoking is very bad," he says. "You know why people smoke? Cause they're nervous. They're worried. They're tense. You know why they're tense? Cause they gotta figure out how they're going to survive, and how they're going to take care of their kids. My father smoked two packs of cigarettes a day."

Jane Driscoll's father was disabled after he broke his hip when she was 2. Three of her older brothers quit school to help support the family. The first time she heard Sanders she thought, "God, this man embodies everything I believe in."

Dad and Mom Burlington

The two formally met at a victory party a week after the 1981 election. They started seeing each other right after that. Work consumed most of their time — Jane became youth coordinator as soon as Sanders became mayor — so the relationship was informal.

In the early days, they piled Jane's kids and Bernie's son into the car and went to a park or a beach.

When the couple went out alone, it usually was to dinner and a movie. Dates always ended with a drive around the city making sure everything was OK. Bernie and Jane, Dad and Mom Burlington, tucking in the city for the night.

The two married last spring. The ceremony didn't seem odd to Burlingtonians even though it took place at North Beach and the public was invited.

The families have combined in a house on Isham Street. Levi, Sanders' son, is 19 and a student at the University of Kentucky studying broadcast journalism. "I guess I want to be the first socialist that has a swimming pool — a modest swimming pool at that — but a swimming pool," he says.

Jane's children are Heather, 17, a freshman at Johnson State College; Carina, 14, a freshman at Burlington High School; and David, 13, who says he agrees with Sanders' idea that rich people should pay more taxes. He just wants to be one of the people who gets a big tax bill.

Raising consciousness

Turning over his job and walking out of City Hall is going to be hard for Sanders. "Very hard," he says. But he's tired. His hair, once thick and black, is thin and white.

"Being mayor, at least the way I do it is a very hard job. Because I feel a responsibility to make certain that the streets get paved, that we stop the war against Nicaragua and that we have a national health-care system. Plus a few hundred other things."

He has succeeded in getting an after-school program, city-subsidized day care, a community boathouse, a city arts office and a city youth council. In 1983, 13,392 people voted in the mayoral election, a city record. But the system is stronger than he thought.

Sanders' projects are toddling out into a cruel world. The system doesn't want to see them survive. So it protects itself.

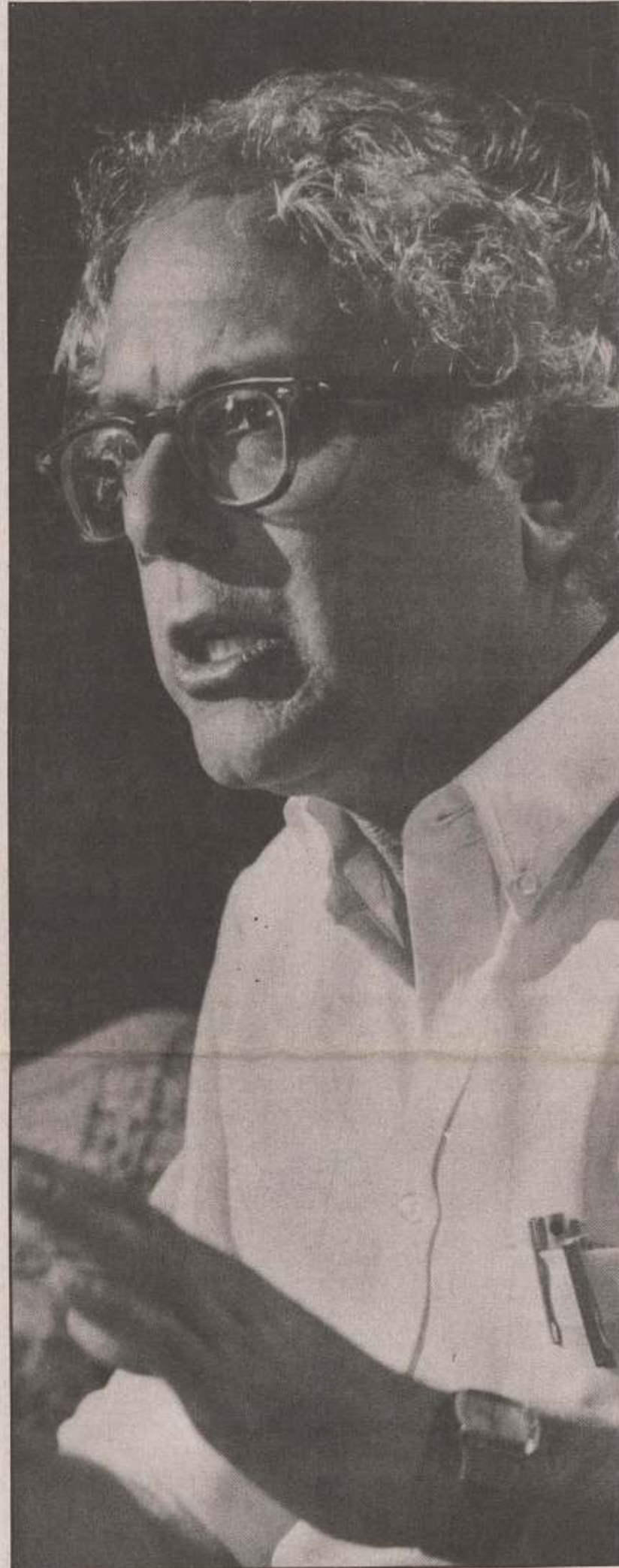
If Burlington had exempted elderly people from property taxes, other cities would have wanted to do it, too, so the Legislature forbade the city Charter change, Sanders says. "We took away tax exemption of the Medical Center; the courts gave it back to them."

"That's the system, OK? And that's what we're up against. Now have I defeated that? Of course not. But we've raised consciousness a half an inch."

So much to do

It is 10 p.m., 13 weeks before inauguration day for the next mayor of Burlington. Sanders has finished a steak special at The Rusty Scuffer, across the street from City Hall. His plate is clean.

He's going to finish his coffee and go back to work. Railroad



Sanders answers questions at a 1985 press conference

officials will be in next week to show aldermen an elaborate plan for the waterfront. Inclusionary zoning, his defeated proposal to provide affordable housing, comes back up for debate. And then there's child care. He's got to find some kind of compromise that can win approval. And he's got to make darn sure that Progressive Peter Clavelle becomes the next

mayor of Burlington.

Coffee finished, Sanders walks back across the street to City Hall. It's quiet and cold. The sound of his soft brown shoes slowly scuffing up the stairs can be heard down the block.

The tall, stooped figure unlocks the door and disappears inside.

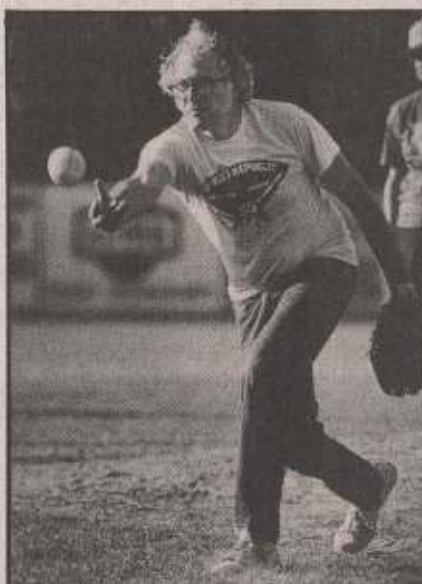
So much to do.



Sanders records folk songs in 1987



Sanders celebrates his first victory in 1981



Sanders pitches for a City Hall softball team



The mayor accompanies Burlington children to Disney World in 1988

All photos from Free Press files