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JERSEY; How One Man Helped Revive New Brunswick

By Terry Golway

JOHN HELDRICH will look you in the eye and tell you that he is "trying to disengage."

"I know what my role is now," he said. "I'm the old sage."

If this sounds like a man getting ready for daily tee times, early-bird specials and bus rides to Atlantic City, don't believe it. The old sage of New Brunswick, who will turn 80 in January, still has work to do -- maybe even more than he realizes.

Mr. Heldrich has been immersed in the revival of this Middlesex County city for nearly 40 years. And since 1989, he has served as founding chairman of the state Employment and Training Commission, which works with politicians, educators, labor leaders and corporate executives on workforce issues.

On Tuesday, voters went to the polls to choose a new governor without hearing very much from the candidates about the cities or about how we are educating and training tomorrow's work force. Granted, neither of these issues can be easily resolved. Still, the absence of any debate on these issues suggests that Mr. Heldrich's work is far from done.

Growing up in New Brunswick, this son of German immigrants learned as a child the importance of community. It ranked just after religion and family, he said. That lesson prepared him for an assignment he never anticipated, one given to him four decades ago as a young executive at Johnson & Johnson, the economic mainstay of his native city.

In 1968, the chairman and chief executive of Johnson & Johnson, Philip B. Hoffman, summoned a rattled Mr. Heldrich to the company's fifth-floor executive suite. "You went there only to be hired or fired," he said.

But another kind of fate awaited Mr. Heldrich. His boss had just returned from the White House, where he met with President Lyndon B. Johnson and business leaders to discuss the plight of the nation's cities. (What a concept!) Businesses were fleeing to the suburbs, and there was some question about whether Johnson & Johnson would stay in New Brunswick. The city, like so many, bore the scars of riot and flight.

The boss told Mr. Heldrich that he wanted somebody to work with community leaders to help pull New Brunswick from the abyss. Mr. Heldrich got the job, he said, because his boss knew he was a native of the city and knew something about it. As Mr. Heldrich nodded and headed toward the door, Mr. Hoffman pointed a well-chewed cigar at the younger man and reminded him: "Just remember. I've never failed at anything."

The story of New Brunswick's transformation into the anti-Newark or anti-Camden -- a city that managed to retain enough jobs, people and capital to muddle through the 70's without collapsing -- has many personal and institutional heroes.

Of course, Johnson & Johnson and Rutgers University recommitted themselves to the city. Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital focused on community service and economic development, rather than on political deal-making. Mayors John Lynch and James Cahill used their considerable power to staunch the bleeding.

And then there was John Heldrich, charged with making sure that neither the city nor his boss failed.

Mr. Heldrich's role in New Brunswick's revival is celebrated in the city of his birth, so much so that a \$110-million office and residential building, which is expected to open downtown next year, will be called Heldrich Plaza.

Yet beyond the banks of the Raritan River, Mr. Heldrich's role as a civic savior is not well-known. In some ways, he is to New Brunswick what Felix Rohatyn is to New York: a civic-minded business leader who figured out how to bring people together to help heal a city.

After getting his assignment, Mr. Heldrich met with executives from the Rouse Corporation, an urban planning company, and eventually formed an organization called New Brunswick Tomorrow to forge the city's revival. Another organization, New Brunswick Development Corp., turned those plans into reality.

"At the time, New Brunswick, like other cities, didn't have an economic development office," Mr. Heldrich recalled. "We became a catalyst."

Working with community groups as well as politicians, executives and anybody who could offer help, Mr. Heldrich and others turned the tide in New Brunswick by the late 1980's.

"The experience taught me that big government is not the solution," he said. "The local community has to stand up, too."

His work led directly to his current interest in workforce issues, from technical training to literacy. Still, he can't help himself when it comes to his favorite city.

"I spend a lot of time these days with people who come in to see me to talk about their ideas for the city," he said. "I get excited by certain things, and I get upset about certain things."

In other words, the passion and drive are still there. It seems fair to believe that the old sage's attempts to "disengage" are doomed to failure.

For New Brunswick, that is a good thing.

Drawing (Drawing by Nancy Doniger)