

Walking the Plank

Claude introduces “Micki” as all of us in the office knew Kamelia McGuirl: “She was a most amazing secretary — quick to adapt to any situation that might arise in a small office such as ours. Whenever someone quit and left us in the lurch, it was always Micki who came to the rescue. She was with us 13 years, from 1967 to 1980, when she retired and moved to Florida.

Since her family still lives in New Jersey she is a frequent visitor up north and every so often puts in an appearance at the office. True to tradition, when we recently had a personnel crisis and needed someone to take over some duties in our shipping department, Micki came for a few weeks to help out.”

Micki has happy memories galore — “pool parties, picnics in Branch Brook Park, clam digging in the Hamptons, movies, dinners in N.Y. City, etc. A not-so-happy memory was when my car mysteriously disappeared from where I parked it when you and I were each taking a class at the New School. While you were in class, luckily, Mo-Li walked me to my car — what car? Was it stolen?



Towed away?? (I thought I parked legally but who can understand N. Y. parking regulations and signs.) Off we all went to the Port Authority garage, where thankfully you had the cash to rescue me.

So many happy memories! Unfortunately, many sad ones with the passing on of those we worked with and loved. We were family and shared the happy and sad times. Thank you to Claude, a wonderful human being, for being my friend and loving me.”

Claude chuckles: “The disappearance of Micki’s car is only one of many bizarre incidents. Things that happen to no one else seem to happen to Micki. Here are some examples: Micki, who was always on time, came two hours late to the office one day. She told us that when her car wouldn’t start she called the AAA, who discovered that someone had stolen her battery during the night. Three days later she found a battery at the front door with a note of apology, stating that there had been an emergency, and

including two opera tickets to make up for the inconvenience. Micki was delighted. Three weeks later, while she was at the opera, her house was robbed! Then there was the time when she went to a shoe store to buy a pair of new shoes. When she couldn't find a suitable pair she discovered that her own shoes had been stolen, and thus she went home barefoot. Or the story of an elegant sheer silk dress she had bought but which blew out of the window of her 48-story Chicago hotel the night before a wedding. or Micki getting hit in the neck getting out of a chairlift at a ski area. In short, Micki is a very charming, most unusual and unique person."



Let Claude introduce Blanche Blazer, who lives some 60 miles south of Carlstadt, comes for lunch a couple of times a year and is always present at the annual office Christmas Party. "I believe she was rather skeptical when she applied for the job. She seemed to be interviewing us instead of the other way around. She came from a huge textile firm whose office manager she disliked, and didn't want to jump from the frying pan into the fire. She played an important role during the development and growth of our business and was in charge of bookkeeping at our company for a period of 29 years."

Her own versions of things is a delight: "Somehow it showed at about age 5 that I would be involved in finances throughout my working career. At that age, my father had brought home a blank checkbook from his silk company and I had a great time writing checks! Omen of the future. Sound familiar?

I attended grade school, high school and many colleges. Never got enough of learning. And though I manned booths at American Cancer society Health Fairs, and, as a member of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America held office in National, Regional, and local chapters, and helped raise money for a Hadassah hospital and children's village in Israel, my life's work was in bookkeeping, accounting for a chain of shoe stores, hosiery manufacturers and a high priced drapery manufacturer who offered me a job in their N.Y. office, Chicago and Los Angeles. But I chose the Claude Bamberger Co. in Ridgefield Park, NJ and remained

there for 30 years. Now in retirement I've made many new friends. I still enjoy sports, love a good movie (particularly a good foreign film) as well as concerts and exploring art galleries and museums.

When I came to work for Claude (& Jack) they were renting a factory at the foot of Mt. Vernon Street in Ridgefield Park, NJ, right on the bank of the Hackensack River. When it rained heavily the bank overflowed, and we were inundated. I always had a pair of boots ready and waiting so I could keep my feet dry.

Finally the lease was up, and Claude and Jack decided that it was time to buy a place of their own. I remember how nervous Jack was to make such a large investment in buying a factory.

They finally found a very nice building on Paterson Plank Road in Carlstadt. Bob Kantrowitz, their attorney and personal friend of Claude, saw to it that the factory was swept clean before we took it over.

But the nicest thing — and I really do believe one of the reasons that Claude bought this building — was that the previous owners were in the business of making in-ground swimming pools. Directly in front of the building was a very nice Olympic-size swimming pool that was used as a demonstration pool, and did we love that pool! It was the place for outdoor picnics at lunch. And weather permitting, we would take a quick swim before lunch. (I always had a bathing suit ready). What I always remember is that Claude insisted on interviewing prospective secretaries in a bathing suit (how he would have liked that!).

Well, we had our fun (we were also permitted to use it weekends for those who did not have a pool at home). Eventually, the pool was filled in to make way for additional parking spaces. We had grown and the additional parking lot was needed. So, as we gave up the pool our business grew. I think Claude impressed many a customer and supplier when we had the pool. They were always invited to be our guests. Claude certainly became famous in the plastics industry."

Claude couldn't help responding: "Ah yes!, the swimming pool. The truth is, that *was* the main reason why we purchased the Carlstadt property! Its suitability for our business was secondary. As Blanche aptly described, it turned out to be the focal point of our activity, not *plastic scrap*, which was our main source of income. Because of our inefficient, lax management and a lack of specific rules, all we had to do was look in the swimming pool when we could not locate one of our employees during working hours.

On weekends there was chaos. Only "privileged" employees had the keys and the use of the pool, but apparently dozens of keys were in circulation; when my family went on a hot summer weekend to use the pool, we found all kinds of unknown people having picnics and enjoying themselves. One day, when I entered my office to change into my bathing suit, I found a stranger at my desk, making a telephone call. When I asked who he was and what he was doing, he merely said: 'I am using this phone to make a long distance call. They won't know the difference.' In the end, when the pool sprang a leak that would have taken a small fortune to repair, we decided to call it quits and turn it into needed additional parking space. While it lasted we had a great deal of fun!"



Jerry Simmons is from Mt Pleasant, S.C. At one time, Mt Pleasant was populated only by the blacks. Now the whites are moving in. Taxes have gone up and blacks lost their property because they could not afford the taxes. They had farms and could fish for food. But now the shore line is dotted with private homes and the blacks have hardly any access to the sea to fish for food.

Jerry had three sisters and three brothers. David was a long shore man at Charleston port; unloaded 3 ships in a day whereas the New York Port unloaded



one ship a week. Lawrence worked as a conductor on the New York subway for 20 years. Earl worked for Claude for 10 years and for the police dept. until he retired.

Jerry's mother worked as housekeeper for the Humphrey family in Charleston for 30 years. They, too were a large family and Jerry used to play with two of her boys. His mother took home all the laundry to be ironed every night in her house. She also sold flowers on the street in Charleston. At that time, the blacks were not allowed beyond Broad Street in Charleston.

Jerry himself dropped out of school to take a job as handyman for the Humphreys for \$15 a week. Mr. Humphrey taught him a lot about repairs, etc.

In World War II, Jerry escaped the draft by drinking "soap water" which showed up in his blood so he was rejected. He says the blacks who were drafted were dying like flies and he was not ready to die.

During the war. Jerry used to date someone at Fort Moultrie. To get by the sentry, he had to learn the required password. Did he ever date a white woman. "No way," he says. "If you go out with a white woman, you never come home alive."



In 1945, Jerry went to New York, stayed a while and then returned home. Back again in New York, he had a job making buttons, which he left when he never got a raise. He was making \$ 37.50 a week

1953, he paid \$5.00 to a head hunter to get him a job. He called the company — Claude Bamberger located at 152 Center Street, Red Hook, Brooklyn — and spoke to a Claus Becher, who told him to report for work at 1 p.m. Jerry didn't believe that this was a real job because no one starts working at 1 p.m. So he was heading back to the head-hunter to get his \$5.00 back, but decided instead to go to Claude Bamberger to find out more. When he showed up at 1 p.m., Claude Becher told him to start working immediately. Jerry was paid \$ 90 a week

(plus 2 hours overtime in the morning, which was another \$42 a week)

Jerry tells the story from there: "I still remember the very first day I met Claude in April 1953. He came to the shop (factory) and watched me work. We were at 152 Center Street in Brooklyn. I was operating a grinder at that time. I didn't even know that he was my boss. An hour later, he told my supervisor that he wanted to see me in his office. I had just started the job and thought that now he was going to lay me off. But I was wrong. Claude told me that he liked the way I work and that I was mechanically inclined. He was moving the business to Ridgely Park in New Jersey and he wanted me to join him there. I told him I didn't want to



work in New Jersey. I was then living in Brooklyn and thought it would be too far to commute to NJ. Claude promised to increase my salary if I join him in Ridgely Park which he did from \$.95 per hour to \$1.10 per hour.

Claude took a liking to me and we would go on trips together to look at materials. I also drove the truck for the company. Whenever we were together we would talk non-stop. I remember one advice he gave me. He said, "Jerry, never mix business with women." That was sound advice.

One day he asked me what I planned to do when I retire. I told him I would like to go back to Mt. Pleasant in South Carolina and build my own house one day. He told me he would help me with that. He said, "First, you find a piece of land."



I started looking. The piece of land I found was the same piece that my father had advised me to buy for \$75.00 in the 1950's but I told him that I was never coming back to Mt. Pleasant. I was wrong. Then Claude hired a lawyer to do the title search on the land. Then he checked my pension fund with the union and advised me to take out the money which I did. I had \$38,000 and the land costs \$15,500. After I bought the land, Claude helped me build my house and sent me some furniture. He was always very generous to me.

I have never met a man like Claude — easy-going, down-to earth and very sensible. He was like a father to me, always looking out for me.

I will never forget the time that Claude and Mo-Li visited me in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina in 2001. Everyone in that community was shocked that my boss would come all the way from New Jersey to celebrate July 4 with me and my family. That was the talk of the town. Boy, did I enjoy their visit. We had such fun. They took me peach-picking and we toured the plantations and we went on those historic tours — all things I never did in my life and never knew existed. I was able in turn to introduce him to the famous iron work created by a relative of mine that dot the city of Charleston and many other cities as well.

After Claude's accident, I visited him at the hospital regularly. And I will never forget our trips together after that to Nantucket. Mo-Li would drive and I kept an eye on Claude. Sometimes he got agitated and when he saw the "Exit sign" along the highway he thought we missed the ferry to Nantucket. He loved Nantucket and was happy to go there.

A few days before Claude passed away, I visited him at the hospital in New York. He told me that he was confused because I was not supposed to be on the

same train with him. He told me he was going somewhere. He said, "Jerry, when I get off from the train, you have to continue your journey. And remember to look after Mo-Li."

To say that friendship can be colorblind misses the whole point!



In early 1980, Mary and Alex Jethanamest moved across the Hudson River from New York City to New Jersey. "In order for me to have more time for our toddler son," Mary (*below*) tells us, "I had decided to change my job in New York City to New Jersey. I answered an ad in *The New York Times* and here I am working for Claude Bamberger Molding Compounds Corp. since 1980. I remember telling Alex that if it doesn't work out I can search for another job. Claude was uncertain whether I would be suitable.. He noticed I took five or more minutes to answer each question. He told me later that it was because a hard thinking person who thinks things through before making a decision. Now almost thirty years later, I am still here. I am so glad that I accepted this job and to be associated with Claude and Mo-Li whom we feel very fortunate to have known. At the beginning Mo-li always said to me, 'You and Claude misunderstand each other all the time.' She had to be our translator even though we all speak English, not German, not Chinese and not Thai either.



*Claude's last visit to
Patterson Plank Road*

Claude was a very special boss and a very warm soft-hearted gentleman. The plastic business has been through good times and bad times, but Claude always looked at the world with a positive attitude. He was very kind and very generous to his employees. His kindness and his generosity never escape from his expression and words. I truly admired his

willpower to enjoy life like a fighter who perseveres. I have come to learn many lessons in how life should be lived.

Claude loved outdoor activities very much. He even planted the raspberry bushes and vegetable garden at the back of the factory. In the summer during lunch break he would change into his gardening outfit and go out to pick the berries and tomatoes with much joy and happiness.

Claude was born to be liked; everyone liked him especially his beautiful smile. He is always in our thoughts and especially in our hearts. We love him and miss him very much.” No wonder Claude described *her* as “among the most conscientious, reliable and trustworthy persons we have come across during our life.”



Robert Stanton Feder was born in Newark in 1931. “I got smart in my seniority,” he says, “and married Eileen — probably as wise a choice as Claude marrying Mo-Li.”

He went to Harvard Law School and became a lawyer and has been practicing in New Jersey ever since. He enjoyed and still enjoys all of it. And though he considers marrying Eileen and producing three daughters, Stacey, Debbie and Lisa, “professionally,” he adds, “I had a far better and more enjoyable life that I ever could have imagined. I am a firm believer in fundamentals upon which our country is based and have found an excellent outlet for my patriotism and my sense of appreciation to those who have



preceded me to the practice of law. I believe in justice and my confidence in those who seek it has stayed with me all these years.”

Enter Claude: “Ever since my close friend and lawyer Bob Kantrowitz had died, we had been looking for a lawyer/friend, someone with whom we could feel comfortable to help us from time to time with legal advice without getting into a big deal. About three or four years ago, when we had a legal problem with our union, someone recommended Bob Feder.

While waiting in his reception room I was kind of impressed by the literature scattered about. Not the usual mix of *Time*, *Vogue*, *US News*, etc. but rather some interesting books and a guide to canoe routes in New Jersey. When Bob finally saw me waiting, I had become engrossed in one of the books and he said, “Oh go ahead and take it home. I keep these books to teach my Spanish speaking clientele English and literature.

When I indicated the canoe guide, it turned out that, like myself, Bob was a canoe enthusiast and loved white water canoeing, the same as we did. Not only did I get good advice about my union problem, but tips on the best canoe routes in New Jersey. Bob Feder seemed to fit the bill!

The feeling was mutual. “Very rarely in life,” Bob says, “do you meet someone and know immediately that you were destined to meet by some mysterious force. Perhaps a shared view of the world, shared ethical values, shared love of the outdoors (especially as seen when paddling a canoe down a river) all of these and more. Thus, we had to meet Claude (and Mo-Li), though the mysterious force took its darn sweet time in arranging the meeting. But it did happen and we were enriched by having known and shared portions of our lives with the irrepressible and ageless Claude and his lovely wife, Mo-Li.”



Christopher M. Wolak, Claude Bamberger Company’s accountant, was born in Nisko, Poland in 1961. He arrived here with his mother, Maria, a seamstress who instilled in her son a work ethic and respect for others that has served him well in his dealing with clients as a CPA. The fact that he was born in the year of the Ox is also quite helpful in coping with the arduous hours one must work in that profession.

Married in 1988 to Pamela Schuster, a hairdresser and owner of her own salon, they have no children of their own by choice, but enjoy spoiling the little ones of their friends and loved ones during the holidays and other social occasions.

There is more to his life than just work, however, and in his spare time Chris enjoys being a Mr. Fix-it, reading magazines on such varied topics as music, stereo and home-theater equipment, cars, computers and watches — usually while listening to CD's from an eclectic collection, which includes classical, jazz and so-called alternative music.



Having reached age 40, Chris reflected on the fact that the first twenty years of one's life are spent in schools, the next twenty acclimating to one's job and finding that significant other.

His conclusion? "That the best is yet to come as all the pieces of the puzzle that is one's life are in place to be enjoyed for another forty (hopefully) years."