

Peoria Labor Day Grand Marshal Matt Bartolo



by Sharon K. Williams

PEORIA, Ill. – Business Manager Matt Bartolo, Laborers Local 165 and field representative for Great Plains Laborers District Council (GPLDC), has been chosen as the 2026 Grand Marshal for the Peoria Labor Day Parade.

Bartolo's family union roots run deep. For as long as he can remember Local 165 has been a part of his life. "I don't really have a memory that doesn't include this local," says Bartolo. "My Grandfather (Milton Hasty)... was secretary-treasurer for 33 years and his brother, my great uncle Bud Hasty was business manager for 37-38 years. I literally came to this local as a little kid 5-6 years old and would hang out with my grandpa, it has been a part of me and my family my entire life."

His teenage years and the first several years of his career were spent tagging along with his brother Dave Demmin, who served as an organizer for the District Council and Associate Director of the West Central Illinois Building and Construction Trades Council (WCIBCTC). "My brother played a huge role in preparing me for this career," says Bartolo. "I was 15-16 years old walking precincts, going to special events, going to fundraisers or helping volunteer at non-profit organizations. I just tried to take it all in and experience the world he was living in. It prepared me for [this] career. I think he really gave me a good understanding or expectation of what a business representative should be doing and so I looked up to him, whether he knew he was doing it or not."

Not only did family play a key role in his career, but he credits the great mentors he had during his early years as a union

laborer beginning in 1999. "I have had the good fortune to be here and being present. I had had a lot of good teachers in this local. This local has had such good leadership for decades, going back to Mike LaHood, Duane Demmin, Charlie Shempf and Tim Schmidgall – these guys laid out a roadmap for me, for our members and I just have been put in such a good position because of the good leadership that we have had."

After joining Local 165, Bartolo spent 10 years in the field. "I spent five years of that with NE Finch, doing anything from site work, underground work, storm sewer – I did a little bit of everything." He then took a one day job on the I-74 upgrade and it turned into four years with Road Safe. "I tell a lot of our members and apprentices we don't have seniority in the construction field...not having that seniority means you go out every day and it is an audition, you have to perform every single day or the employers that pay us will find someone else. It is showing up every day. As long as you have that union card in your pocket and you have the training."

Bartolo's next move was into the office as a field representative under Shempf's leadership. His best piece of advice came early from Shempf, who he says was his biggest advocate and supporter. "[Charlie] said, 'you show up every day and you do your job, people pay attention' and that has been the single best advice I received. That is how I come to work every day."

Within a year, Bartolo then moved into the Secretary-Treasurer position, under Business Manager Schmidgall after Shempf moved to the GPLDC. "I maintained that position until January 2024. Tim Schmidgall retired and I have been business manager ever since."

In April, Bartolo was appointed to field representative of GPLDC. His position includes supporting the District Council. "I am spending more time being a resource – negotiating contracts, business development in Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota. I am trying to acclimate to how the other locals operate, how they do business to better understand the moving parts politically. We are extremely fortunate in Illinois. [I] see first hand how the deck is stacked against working families in those Right To Work states and especially how unions are viewed. All the safeguards and policies that have been implemented in Illinois really in the recent past in preventing and prohibiting right to work. Seeing that first hand in other states is pretty eye opening."

Shempf's advice has been the cornerstone of Bartolo's work ethic. That advice has given him plenty of additional opportunities, including currently serving as president of the WCIBCTC. Before that, he served as secretary-treasurer for several years. "I sit on a ton of civic boards, whether it's the Peoria Civic Center, the Election Commission, Friends of Fatherless Boys, it has given me the opportunity to help other people, serve people, serve the community – it reminds the general public that we in the labor movement are the fabric of this community."

Bartolo takes his union membership very seriously and works hard to service not only his members but the community at large. "We want to make sure our union members go to work every day and on every single project in our back yard. There is a sense of pride. I think it is noble work to try to make sure that people are paid a livable wage, that they have access to good health insurance and then have a dignified retirement with a pension and annuity. Trying to secure all those things for our members is what makes us a better option for building a road, a bridge, a building. We are better because of our training, because of our safety. We make sure that all workers voices are heard."

"Matt truly embodies the spirit of a good union man," says Executive Director Clint Drury of the WCIBCTC. "His priority is first and foremost to provide better lives for his members, but secondarily he is a staunch advocate for all union members. Matt's innate leadership skills, and pragmatic approach to problem solving and strong work ethic have allowed him to continue the successes and improve upon the leadership that came before him at Local 165."

Bartolo is blessed to have a great support system at home. His long hours and commitment to the labor movement needs a family who is committed to the same goals and values. "I want to thank my wife (Aileen) and two girls (Victoria and Bianca) and my family for sharing me with 17,000 trades men and women. It is a luxury to have a wife and kids who understand the importance of the work that we do. I couldn't do it without them. I am very fortunate."

Understanding the importance of being chosen as a grand marshal, Bartolo is humbled by his peers recognizing his work. "We should be proud this is a union town and that a recognition like this is seen by the community. Not just me being embraced, but just the union movement in central Illinois is embraced by the community and I think it is worth celebrating."