Shane Vlasic and Anthony Gatto

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 Transcription

M-Michael Lewis

I-Interviewer

M- I just want to say good morning, my name is Mike Lewis. I am a 34 year steel worker from east Baltimore. I worked at Sparrows point since I graduated from high school back in 1978, and I am currently one of our financial administrators here at the local union until the plant closed down I was the financial secretary here at the local union. During my 34-year career at Sparrows point I was hired as a laborer. I worked my way up on the production line and I became a crane operator. Actually my inconvenient position in the plant as it was closing was that of a crane operator in what was called the new coal mill. However during my career down there I became a shop steward, eventually became one of our alternate grievance committee people. I worked as a safety coordinator for the new coal mill. I spent 9 years as a safety instructor for the entire plant, which included doing safety classes not just for the bargaining unit, but for salaried employees as well. So I working in, first Beth Steel, then ISG, Middle, Osalor metals, Severnstal, then finally RG, it was a great opportunity for me to make a great middle class lifestyle for myself and my family.

I- That’s incredible. Lets start at the beginning, where did you grow up?

M- I grew up in east Baltimore, I grew up right off of East Bittle Street near Edison Highway in a section right across the bridge for Holland Town. In an area that is a part of the Bel Air, Edison community today.

I-How did you first hear about Sparrows Point? How did you first get to Sparrows Point?

M- Well the block I grew up on I was raised by my grandparents, and my granddad had originally worked at Beth Steel when he came to Baltimore. Him and my great uncle Norman in 1927, but my granddad left after 4 years and became a long shore man. He worked out of local 333 for the I.L.A . My great uncle Norman worked at Beth Steel from 1927 until he retired in 1970. And in the block that I grew up at, the block of 1200 block of North Potomac Street, well there were at least 9 fathers on that block that worked at the plant. Bethlehem Steel was the fabric of the community as far as an employer goes. Not just Bethlehem Steel but we had fathers the worked at General Motors, at Western Electric, at Continental Cam. There were numerous manufacturing facilities in that blue collar, working class community that employed many of my friend’s fathers, and grandfathers.

I- So when you were graduating high school, it was just no though about it I’m going to go to Sparrows Point?

M- Well, not exactly. Like most people at that age you think you know everything, and you know nothing. I wanted to go to college and yet again I did not want to go to college. So I was sort of undecided. The ironic thing was that when I graduated from Patterson, we were at a time when you could get out of high school and still find a decent job that you could provide for yourself and your family for life. You know, and we were always taught if you play by the rules, you work hard, you know you go to work everyday, you show up, pay your bills, everything will be fine. This was the world we grew up in. I’ll give you a little example; I grew up down the street from where Omco Steel was located. Right on the corner of Edison, and Bittle Street. Across the street from that was an O’brien Paint factory. General Motors was operating on Bruin Highway. I filled out applications when I was getting out of high school at Bef Steel, at General Motors, at Omco Steel, and I took the United States Post Office test. Eventually I heard from all four of them with employment opportunities, but I took the job at Bef Steel. So I could have had four jobs, a choice, and this was in 1978. This was the landscape back then. There were employment opportunities for my generation that may not be available for the generation getting out of high school today. I chose Bef Steel and I don’t really regret my choice. I regret how we turned out, but I’ve had a great middle class lifestyle, because I’ve had a good job that paid union wages, that provided me with union benefits.

I- So tell me about those first days, weeks, months as a teenager working in Sparrows Point.

M- Well it was a big jump from high school. It was coming into an atmosphere, that you never really had experience in before. Fortunately there were a lot of people at the plant then, and a lot of the senior guys felt an obligation somewhat to protect your, to try to show you the ropes, and also let you know you have to pay your dues like they did. You had to take some of the less attractive jobs, you knew you were going to have to deal with being laid off from time to time but the though of being shut down was something that we never even fathomed. But it was a great experience, you had to learn the ropes, you saw how things worked, and being a product of the 70’s, a lot of the real challenging issues like Mr. Bartee talked about have pretty much been resolved. You didn’t have the blatant types of discrimination; maybe people like what my grandfather and great uncle went through. I viewed it as an opportunity for that one-day if I worked hard, if I applied myself, there were opportunities for me to walk up that latter. Eventually in some small way I did. I didn’t just stay in labor department I was able to become something at that plant that I know my grandfather would have never envisioned.

I- I would like to ask more about your grandfather, and your uncle, but just tell me about your involvement in to union. How did that start?

M- Well it started because management blatantly lied on me. I wasn’t always a dedicated, I was a young person I didn’t like working swing shifts. I though it was, Like a lot of young people, I thought Friday and Saturday nights belonged to me. And 3-11 Friday, 11-7 Saturday night, I said this is just ridiculous, if it was something going on at that time I might find an excuse not to come to work, during the summer. Regrettably that’s true. However with overtime and taking on responsibilities like rent, and mortgage you know car payments and all of the things people want, I realized the value of my job. When I saw a lot of things happening around me, then fortunately there were union people shop stewards zone committee people and union vice presidents that said you should take advantage of some opportunities in the union. We think that maybe you could be a person that could make a difference. To be perfectly honest with you I didn’t see that in myself at that time. I was encouraged to get involved by people who cared, and that’s how I got involved in the union. Then when a foreman blatantly lied on me and his lie was believed I said you see that they just made an activist out of me.

I- Did you work that out?

M- It eventually worked out, then I became an advocate for what was right, and for some of the tactics that were still going on that I didn’t necessarily agree with

I- So how long have you been in the union?

M- I’ve been in the union since day one. But if you mean how long have I been an advocate. Well I guess my union advocacy started in my work in the union in started in earnest back in around 1996.

I- what kind of feelings do you feel from being involved in the union and being and advocate?

M- Well what I feel is thank god for unions in America. Because it made me realize that nothing was given freely, everything was born out of struggle. A lot of people today take for granite that fact that you get paid vacations. That was something born out of the labor movement. That you get paid if you off sick, that you have workers compensation laws, that you have employer provided health insurance, that you have many safeguards in place, all that were met with resistance when lobbied for that we have in place today that a lot of people think that they are etched into the fabric, and today I see them being eroded not with a maul, with a chiseled. They are being chiseled away, a lot of the things that we fought for are being chiseled away and being taken away from us today.

I- Lets go back to the mill, how would you describe life there during work?

M- I would describe it today as great. Now lets face it no person in there 20s like taking a lunch bag to work on Thursday, or Friday night to work the graveyard shift. That graveyard shift provided an opportunity for a couple other people to be working two other shifts. Today I realize that its all a part of paying your dues. Life in the mill was great and when I say that you build a comradery and build a kinship with a group of people, almost like a football team where you show up to battle everyday and you dig down in the trenches together. Over time you realize you spend just as much time with that group of men and women as you do with your own family and they actually become like a part of your own family. So when you show up to work everyday, it’s not like your going to some alien location, your going to a place where your brothers and sisters are. You’re going to a place where a lot of the friendships evolve over time. Where the friends that you have in life that you will carry through you whole life, a lot of times we meet these people in our place of work. Especially a place like Sparrows Point, where we had so many struggles, we had so much unity.

I- So now that it’s closed and your fighting for the union halls, what’s important about it? What do you want others to know? What’s the legacy?

M-What I would like for what happened to sparrows point to be almost like a classroom educational seminar because we're not unique this is been happening all over the country and we are slowly losing the middle class because we're losing An entire segment of our economy. And I’ll just use myself as an example; you know I was a pretty decent student in high school. There was times that I probably could have applied myself a little more. Now I may not be the fastest boat in the navy as they say, but, I was a pretty apt student. But I was provided with an opportunity that if I didn’t go to college I could find a job where I could sustain the American middle class lifestyle to provide me and my family with the house in the suburbs with the white picket fence. I could get a car every five or six years. I could take a vacation, I could pay my bills. I could make purchases that kept our economy going. I had health care benefits that were as good as any that myself and a lot of other people took for granted. You know I could visit my travel agent every year and I could take a vacation. I could do all of the things that we think of as normal everyday middle class lifestyle things. But the straw that stirred that drink was my job at Beth Steel. Like I said I came in and part of the American dream has always been that if you work hard you can move up. Well a plant like Beth Steel, a plant like a General Motors, or a Ford plant provide that opportunity for the average joe growing up in America. You know, I came in as a laborer my first job was on a sheers pulling scrap to make sure it went into a scrap bailer right. Well my last job was a financial officer at the local union. Many people in my peer group came in and they took the route into management. They worked their way up the line, they learned all of the jobs in the progression and they went on the salary side and they became foremen. Some even went into sales and engineering. The factory, the plant, provided that stepping stone to progress in American society. And what I want the lesson at Sparrows Point to be, is that it doesn’t matter about the stock price is. Doesn’t matter what NASDAQ says or any of that other stuff what matters is that without that plant generating those jobs and those stepping stones forward that people like me and thousands if not millions of other people like me lose their opportunity at the American Dream. The American dream is shrinking for a lot of people you know instead of us and I don’t want to get too editorial on this but instead of us building prisons, and building, can somebody take that for me, sorry, it keeps ringing, sorry about that, instead of us building prisons, maybe we need to take some of that tax money and invest in our info structure and make sure that we do what those other countries do and say that if we are going to pay for it we at least need to make a concerted effort to see to it that it’s built here, that we make it. You know I was in Annapolis last week on behalf of our sub district elective Joe Roselle and myself and we testified before the Maryland state senate on the senate bill 47 which was an expansion on a bill that said if it’s state money spent on an info structure project it would use American made steel. This was to expand it into like if they built a school the materials going into that school would be made in America. Now most people think that would be common sense, you want the contract? All right, buy the stuff here. We had lobbyists lined up against this bill, claiming, well you know its putting a burden on business to be able to get these bolts and these nails and these studs here the glass that goes in a fire extinguisher we no longer make. You know to me that’s outrageous, that’s outrageous you know and we can’t understand why we have terms like a jobless recovery. It’s because the factories that people used to return to work are no longer there. What we are Joe Roselle and myself and a lot of people and 1784 other union members that lost their jobs what we are, are living breathing examples of how you can have an economy in quote recovery and have so many people losing their jobs. Because we’re not making the things that we need to sustain ourselves as a society.

I – Thank you, but before I forget, would you tell me what you remember and know about your grandfather and uncle at Scotts Point?

M – my grandfather, to me, my parents divorced when I was very young and my grandfather to me was a great, great man. He probably went as far as the fourth grade in school but he was one of the smartest people that ever lived and he had a work ethic. He was a long shoreman. And he was grounded in his value and beliefs system that life ain’t free and you get up and you either gonna go to school or go to work or both and he taught us the that you get a job you try to put a few pennies in the bank no matter what it is and that you take care of your responsibilities. And my great uncle was sort of the same way you know you take a lot of the things that they say for granted and I spent a lot of time with my grandfather and god blessed them with 92 years of life and he and I was his favorite, I’m proud to say my other cousins may get mad but I was his favorite and I was with him all the way to the end and I think about him all the time you know, he was the most impact-full male on my life he was a big strong, middle linebacker type guy and uh you know a day doesn’t go by that I don’t think about him and I’m thankful for everything that he did for me.

I – Thank you I’m gonna let some of the students, any questions?

Kaitlyn – You were talking about your grandfather and the family and the relationships that you built here at the mill, a lot of the other gentlemen that we’ve spoken to today are like a generation above you. I’m curious about; um the mentoring relationships that you built with these gentlemen, that you know you may have hoped to pass on to the next generation who would have come to work at the mill with you?

M – The thing was that they were unified because they had to be you know back then the companies had all the power and you know they had to fight for everything. And they were always quick to tell us and our generation not to take a lot of stuff for granted. That nothing was given freely. We had to fight for this you know the vacation times, the being able to wait until you got some seniority then you can pick a summer weeks vacation we had to fight for that you know that insurance that you got for you and your family we fought for that. They were quick to remind us of that. And it was real important because, some of the generation, not all that came behind us, they didn’t experience lay offs. You know, we have a group of people that they never were really laid off until the plant shut down. Ok we experienced layoffs so we knew that there was a process there was a cyclical business that we were in it was peaks and valleys and layoffs were a common place well when you’re trying to explain to people that this is a struggle that we in as organized labor and their not laid off and working overtime and they come in the door with these healthcare benefits on day one no probationary period day one the have all of these benefits they kind of think that you’re a dinosaur. And it’s not unfortunately until the rug is pulled out from them and they go out and they try to find something comparable or they get that unfortunate slap of reality that they realize just what we were talking about and how good we really had it. So that’s the thing I got from the Ed Barteze and Don Kelners of the world.

I- Another question please? Alright so what do you want in addition to understanding about global capitalism and corporations and the way it is now and how unions are being chipped away at what they fought for over the decades. What else is important about Sparrows Point that you want others to know on a more emotional level or what have you?

M– I want people to realize is impact on this region. Over the course of time a lot of things that are in place today if you look at Edgemear, if you look at Turner’s Station, if you look at the town of Dundalk itself. It was built solely because that plant was there. The reason that they funded the building of the key bridge was to help facilitate the commerce dealing with the Bethlehem steel plant. It had such a vital impact on our economy the whole area along north point blvd, north point road merit blvd that whole section of town would not be there if it wasn’t for the impact of that Sparrows Point plant. And I would hope that people would see how that when you take away a nucleus like that it has a devastating ripple effect along the food chain. We really need, a lot of younger people today to put down facebook for a minute, put down twitter for a minute, and understand that although you make have a lot of opportunities, and everything may be instantaneous in the world you live in today, you gonna have to one day come to the realization, that we cannot have a society where so few have so many, so much, and everybody else is fighting for the crumbs at the bottom. Without a sustainable middle class, and without a manufacturing sector, opportunities for advancement will shrink. And we will be a society that cannot continue to function. And it’s up to the people at your university people at all of the universities around this country, to be the difference makers. Because right now I am not optimistic that if we continue shutting down factories and building fast food restaurants that we can sustain ourselves. And I don’t want us to be divided, I heard the gentleman speak about Pizza Hut instead of providing a big multi-million dollar corporation like Pizza Hut instead of providing health insurance for its employees and working full time like it does its executives would rather reduce their hours to part time so that you have un-insured people now getting even less hours because what they provide for the people not making the pizzas they won’t provide for the people making the product that they depend on to satisfy their customer base. I mean there is such a thing as a social conscience, you know and a lot of people don’t have a problem looking at the symbols of this country the stars and stripes, the great symbols of this country, and we should all pay homage to the greatness of this country. We should all pay homage to those symbols. For patriotism is more than just a symbolic gesture, its time for people who call themselves patriots to start taking their check book and invest it in we the people. Start building a plant here. Stop taking the easy way out. And outsourcing these jobs to China and Indonesia. Invest in the people of America. Anybody can put their hand over their heart in a patriotic gesture, but can you put your money where your hand is? Can you put your money over your heart and make opportunities available for people of this country? That’s what it’s gonna take. Thank you.