



# Teresa Nunes Dall

Sometimes people just need a little help. Two purposes drive this piece – one is to make and illustrate the previous simple statement, and one is to try to insure that a great man of New Bedford, Clarence Nunes, who lived that philosophy, is not forgotten, now that many – family, friends, and employees – are passing on each year. His life of helping others should be remembered and serve as a reminder and a model; especially in our current economic climate, which is painfully difficult and discouraging for so many families. Besides, it is a good story.

Clarence Nunes, founder of Sea View Fillet, which was a prosperous fish plant started in a modest, cramped wooden building on Homer's Wharf was my dad. Clarence had grown up very poor – three brothers in a bed, sleeping between mattresses to keep warm in an attic room with no heat - poor. A man who educated himself and deeply valued education, despite his own schooling having ended at grammar school, so that he could go to work as a sweeper in a cotton mill to help support his brothers and sisters. He often told the story of his own father taking him to the mill to meet the floor boss on the first day, and the floor man asking, "Kid, how far can you see?"

"All the way down there," said the little boy proudly, pointing to the far reaches of the mill floor."

"That's how far you sweep."

I grew up in a neighborhood in the far north end of New Bedford, a neighborhood in which no one was rich and no one was really poor. Clarence, however, had two neighborhoods – where our home was and also the neighborhood of his fish plant workers and their families, as well as those who came to the plant to ask for fish, because their families were hungry. The fish business grew and moved to a larger metal building at the South Terminal, and Clarence's neighborhood grew larger, too. Everyone downtown and in the south end began to know him, whether they called him Mr. Nunes, Clarence, Nunsey, or Lefty (He had a brief career as a professional boxer in his early twenties; hence, the "Lefty."). The legacy of his caring and generosity needs to be remembered, here, at least, if not in the formal history of New Bedford.

Much of his generosity was the informal sort – just giving those who needed help some money to tide them over-whether that was family or friends or just those in his other neighborhood. I remember countless times when my uncles or aunts needed some money – not loans; just a little help; it didn't matter whether it was my mother's family or his family; it was all the same. He cared about everyone; his heart was big, and family was a broad term. Sometimes I think he bought new furniture for our home, just so that he could give couches, chairs, and bedroom sets to relatives. He was so grateful for his own prosperity that he couldn't wait to share.

He managed a good deal of his personal charity through the church in his work neighborhood – Our Lady of Assumption Church, where he got to know the priests and learned about those who needed some help. When Clarence died of a heart attack, sadly way too soon, three extra priests, priests the family didn't know, presented themselves at his funeral and asked to share in the celebration of the Mass; to give thanks for his generosity to their parishioners. One of them told us that Mr. Nunes had bought half the cribs and baby carriages in the south end. When a family was expecting a baby, he wanted to be sure that they had what they needed. One priest told of so many instances when he took children in the neighborhood downtown to be fitted with new shoes. Shoes for kids were really important to Clarence; he often spoke of wearing shoes that were too small, when he was a child, and of the foot pain he endured all his life because of the ill-fitting shoes. That would not happen to any children, when he could help



Then there was Pork Chops; I never knew his real name, but he was part of Clarence’s Saturday morning errands. Sometimes I came along. Pork Chops was a disabled man Clarence met sometime in his New Bedford life, and Pork Chops evidently needed help. Now this was a time when services for someone poor, alone, and unable to get around very well were not easily available; so Clarence, as we understood it, pretty much supported him. Clarence wasn’t rich, but he was he was logical, by his own philosophy; Pork Chops needed money, and Clarence had enough to share. The Saturday morning errands would then continued with a stop at Gollis Men’s Store on Pleasant Street to buy a new shirt or belt for the weekend and a stop at Sig Mitton’s Bakery on Union Street for some wonderful rye breads and pastries – enough for all the relatives who would be stopping in – always an abundance. Growing up poor left its mark – but for all of us who shared in the love and generosity, a positive mark.

So organized charities are a good thing; social services are a good thing, but sometimes people just need a little help; and if any of us have something extra, the memory of this great man of New Bedford should prompt us to share.