

# Senator Sherrod Brown Comes to the Village

**Through his new book, Brown urges progressive nationwide reforms**

By Eric Uhlfelder

At the funeral of New York Senator Robert Kennedy in June of 1968 at St. Patrick's Cathedral, his brother Ted tearfully struggled to recall his slain brother as a man "who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it."

Anyone who was touched by Bobby can't help choking up hearing these words again. They remind us of what we lost and the change in the arc of this country's history that never was. His death marked the end of the country's last great progressive movement.

In his new book, *Desk 88*, Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown recalls Kennedy and seven other progressive senators—including Hugo Black, William Proxmire, and Herbert Lehman—who also served from the same desk. He wrote this book to put a fire under progressives and remind them of what is possible, especially during times of great divide.

The arc of current history was also radically distorted when Hillary Clinton opted not to select Brown as her running mate in 2016. He was on her short list. Had she teamed up with him, I believe Clinton would've been president.

The three-term senator from Ohio is a rare democrat from a state that has also elected the likes of pro-Trump conservatives Senator Rob Portman and Representative Jim Jordan. In just the first eleven days of December, Brown pushed the country to recognize the critical role of a fair and accurate census, helped workers unionize, secured more than \$46 million



**CECILE RICHARDS INTERVIEWS SENATOR SHERROD BROWN** at Cooper Union's Great Hall in New York. Photo courtesy of The Cooper Union/Photo by Marget Long.

for historically black institutions of higher education, and brought additional aid to servicemen and veterans.

Brown, 67, is an anachronism from the sixties. He wears his wavy hair longer than most, avoids custom-tailored clothing, and buys suits made in Ohio. He's casual and precise, with an engaging smile that makes him light and serious at the same time. His lapel is adorned with a pin of a canary to remind folks of the hardships facing coal miners and all workers.

Informed by his Lutheran faith, Brown is committed to a myriad of progressive causes. He has trumpeted fair trade, labor rights, US manufacturing, affordable health care, Wall Street reform, improved race relations, and tax credits for low- and middle-income Americans. At the same time he is remarkably pragmatic.

His direct, empathetic, no-spin, uniquely coarse-sounding voice recalls what we lost at the Ambassador Hotel in California in June of 1968. Last month he spoke at Cooper Union's Great Hall about his new book. I spoke with him afterwards about matters

related to this eight-year project.

*Why did you write this book?*

I love history. I thought I could teach folks about the pivotal role of progressive eras. They are often short, we lose more than we win, but when we win, we win really big: Collective Bargaining, Social Security, Clean Air, Civil Rights, Medicare...all the things that are now so important to so many.

Brown begins his book by distinguishing between conservatives, who support the status quo; and progressives, who seem more quixotic. His thoughts recall the famous quote Bobby Kennedy borrowed from Shaw: "Some men see things as they are and say, why. I dream things that never were and say, why not." So I asked Brown,

*Why don't conservatives dream?*

I don't know. All my colleagues want the country to be better. But most conservatives believe in the trickle-down philosophy that the poor and disadvantaged will see improvement if the wealthy excel. I believe the economy grows from the low-

er- and middle-class out. If you can tax the wealthier more to have better schools in poorer neighborhoods, then we'll likely end up with a better country.

I never met a person less empathetic than our current president. But I don't feel qualified to know why conservatives aren't moved by suffering. The longer I am in politics, the less I want to ascribe motives to behavior.

*So how can you work with conservatives?*

I make arguments that make financial sense about helping those less fortunate... We will save on welfare and Medicaid if we can educate the poor, get them into decent jobs. Providing shelter for homeless people will help make them more productive citizens. Sometimes this approach works. Then we see the president proposing cuts to food stamps, which will only make recipients less productive, less healthy, and more inclined toward crime to survive.

*What made Bobby Kennedy unique?*

His evolution. He started off on the wrong side of many issues. He didn't understand his privilege, worked for McCarthy, wire-tapped Dr. King. But his empathy was unleashed when his brother was shot. It forced him to be his own man. He went out in the world and saw the suffering in Bedford Stuyvesant, Indian reservations, Mississippi, and migrant workers across the land. "He got his public opinion bath," as Lincoln would've put it.

*How will someone writing about Desk 88 look back at you forty years on?*

I'll let history judge that. But I think I will fit into the book in the same way the others have. As a Lutheran, part of my faith is that the charity you do is even better when no one knows about it.

## Do We Really Need Newspapers?

The Chicago Tribune, for lack of ads, got sold last week, and the Times article cataloged other venerable papers cutting staff and being bought by financial dice shooters. The Village's new Brooklyn owners indiscriminately display ads for a Bronx Bank

It takes a Trump-like ego to think that WestView News can escape the arithmetic of high cost to print and distribute and the difficulty in getting ads when you can go online free. But we are going to try. We are going to try—that is—if you think it is worth the effort? We like the paper and as I keep saying it could become much better—more valuable to the West Village readers if we can better, more fully, report on what is important to us living here (I raised a family here over 50 years).

At about this point readers are skipping to another page—we have heard too many hard luck stories and, so what if another paper goes out of business—I get my news from TV anyway. And then I get a 96-year-old woman who had her life savings conned away from her over the phone from people who said they were a government office—she calls WestView. Politicians sit down for a cup of coffee at my kitchen table when they are running for office and they would rather not read a sarcastic appraisal of their legislative ideas.

What is more effective—sending an email to your City Councilman or seeing it printed in

WestView where thousands can read it?

I feel, after 15 years, we are just warming up to what a community newspaper can be so I don't want you to send us \$12 to continue to get the old WestView—I want you to send it in the hope you will get a better and better WestView.

And then boy, we get a heart operating room—what newspaper has done that?

But wait, this is your newspaper, and you have lived a unique and interesting life and every once in a while what you have learned in your life time makes you stop and think "no, they got it wrong" and then write to WestView and straighten us out.

As I said, This is not my newspaper—it is your newspaper—but if you want my opinion, I think we ought to try and keep it.

- OK let's try and keep it alive! Here is my \$12 for one year.
- Here is \$24 for two years.
- Here is my gift to WestView for a job well done \$\_\_\_\_\_

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