



Jerry W. Friedman

I have a confession to make. In my spare time, I love to watch old movies, especially those from the 1930s and 1940s. My preference is for the really nostalgic and sentimental flicks in which the good folks always win out and the endings are happy. Maybe it's because we confront human tragedy on a daily basis that I find escape in this genre, but that's how I prefer to spend my limited non-sports TV time.

One of my all-time favorites is the Jimmy Stewart–Donna Reed Christmas classic, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The premise of the story is that an honorable man, down on his luck, gets a glimpse of what the world would be like if he didn’t exist. It’s a wonderful message about the impact that even a relatively obscure person with good intentions can have on society. I thought about this movie recently when I overheard a conversation while standing in a hotel check-out line after attending a retirement dinner the previous night. The person in front of me asked what the big ballroom event had been the night before. Another person responded that it was a dinner for a “retiring bureaucrat.” The person’s dismissive comment was, “Who would notice?”

While I probably should have just ignored this exchange, I felt compelled to chime in and advise them of just how many people should notice and the impact a “single bureaucrat” can have on a community. It has been a personal mission of mine to defend against negative bias toward public servants and tell our human service story in a more positive, accurate light. The dinner was in honor of Don Jose Stovall, who retired after more than 35 years of service as director of Philadelphia’s public welfare system. Don Jose is one of the most amazing human service professionals I have ever encountered. For more than a third of a century, he provided outstanding leadership in one of the nation’s toughest environments. While his focus was Philadelphia, his impact was felt across Pennsylvania and beyond. Don Jose also served as chair of American Public Human Services Association’s (then the American Public Welfare Association) National Council of Local Human Service Administrators.

In summarizing his career, one is immediately struck by the size and scope of Don Jose’s responsibility. He oversaw 2,000 employees throughout the Philadelphia region who provided a safety net to

nearly half a million residents. His annual expenditures, excluding medical assistance claims, exceeded a half a billion dollars for services ranging from TANF, food stamps, work programs, and child care to LIHEAP, disaster response, and the State Blind Pension.

Don Jose’s tenure was marked by innovation, risk taking, community activism, and staff development. For example, he was the first administrator to implement an electronic funds process to replace fraud-ridden paper checks in Pennsylvania. Perhaps his most notable accomplishment, however, was developing Pennsylvania’s New Directions Program, a pioneering welfare-to-work effort that preceded PRWORA by nearly a decade. Don Jose led the design and implementation phase of this program, which remains the state’s primary TANF work component. Since its implementation, the lives of more than 50,000 Philadelphia residents and their families have improved substantially through work. Don Jose’s vision not only contributed immensely to the state’s economy, but also transformed the culture of the Public Welfare Department to one where the first message is, “What can I do to help you get a job today?”

Don Jose took great pride in his role as teacher and mentor. During his tenure, more than 7,000 people were hired into the Philadelphia public welfare system. While many have made it a career, for others it represented an entry-level opportunity that served as a stepping stone to leadership positions in business, health care, politics, and academia. Many of Philadelphia’s current leaders got their start under Don Jose’s leadership and they continue to seek his guidance and advice.

Given 35 years at that level of responsibility, Don Jose’s sphere of influence simply cannot be measured. He touched so many lives who, in turn, touched others, including me. During the banquet, John F. White Jr., former Pennsylvania DPW secretary and current APHSA board member, recalled visiting Don Jose to discuss his pending Cabinet appointment as Pennsylvania secretary of Transportation. Don Jose persuaded him that his talents were needed more in human services than in transportation, which ultimately led to

his appointment as DPW secretary. John White, in turn, appointed me to direct the Pennsylvania Income Maintenance System.

What’s not captured in a list of his responsibilities and accomplishments is his character. Don Jose possesses great charisma and a larger-than-life presence. And yet, he is a humble man with simple tastes who’s guided by his strong personal faith. The words integrity, honesty, dedication, and commitment were repeatedly used in describing him at the banquet. While working with him, I was always struck by

## Homage to Don Jose: ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’

his energy and enthusiasm. In spite of the crisis “du jour,” I never saw him angry or defeated. With a twinkle in his eye and armed with a great sense of humor, he approached every challenge with a practical, “can-do” attitude. Don Jose’s glass is always half full. He is truly an inspiration to thousands who had the honor and privilege of working with him. It’s for that reason that more than 450 friends and former colleagues jammed into a local hotel (to the point of inconvenience to the other guests) to pay homage and offer thanks to this great man.

Unlike the classic movie script, we do not know what Philadelphia would be like without Don Jose Stovall, but we do know what it has become because of his service. The wonderful news for our society is that Don Jose has thousands of counterparts throughout the country who have chosen a similar path of service and are making a huge difference in their communities. Personally, I think that it has the makings of a great Hollywood movie. To Don Jose, we say, “Thank you, dear friend, ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’”