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Down memory lane with Bob Weiner: Methadone and more

When we were starting out as a drugs journalist, one of our first sources was Bob Weiner, then press person for the House of Representatives Select Committee on Narcotics, headed by Charles Rangel (D-NY). Much later, Weiner was press person for Barry McCaffrey, a consultant to an opioid treatment program (OTP) chain who did much good work for methadone treatment promotion. We checked in with Weiner last week, and he sent us some reminiscences.

“You may know that before I worked for Rangel at the Narcotics Committee, I worked for House Aging Committee Chairman Claude Pepper (as the committee’s Chief of Staff, we abolished mandatory retirement 359-2 in House and 89-10 in the Senate, and President Carter signed the bill.) Even before that I was Rep. Ed Koch’s (D-NY), (later Mayor of New York City) legislative assistant in the House.

“We [Koch and I] were close friends for the rest of his life even after I took other jobs. We co-wrote some op-eds together, and Pat (Weiner’s wife)

and I had dinner with him at Sardi’s under his Mayor caricature on the wall. As a past Koch staffer and close friend I was invited to Koch’s funeral and was seated next to Rupert Murdoch, whose endorsement of Koch was instrumental in his later becoming elected three times as Mayor of New York City.

“Also at the funeral as an ex-Mayor was Rudolph Giuliani [former Mayor of New York City, who tried to eliminate OTPs], and I said hi to him, told him I was Koch’s legislative assistant, but also that I was Barry McCaffrey’s communications director. I got a warm smile from Giuliani with the Koch reference, but then a scowl and look down at the floor when I mentioned McCaffrey.

“I asked Gen. McCaffrey when I got back what was that all about. Gen. McCaffrey reminded me what we did to Giuliani!! I was a piece of that too by the way. Giuliani hated methadone and was part of the uneducated cohort believing “just another drug” so should not be treatment for heroin and opioids. So

McCaffrey got the [New York] City’s Health Department Chief and Police Chief to agree with us and say that methadone was a super treatment and would greatly reduce the crime from heroin addiction strategies to buy, sell and use it. and of course, reduce heroin use and addiction itself, and had a massive history of scientifically proven success.

“Then we called Chris Wren of *The New York Times* and he put the whole story on the front page — the endorsements of methadone by the top NYC health and law officials, McCaffrey’s speaking at the Parrino [Mark Parrino, president of AATOD] press conference and the Giuliani-attempted block of methadone.

“Giuliani’s opposition to methadone disappeared. But he never forgave McCaffrey.”

[*Editor’s note: Giuliani was mayor during the 1990s; McCaffrey was also director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.*]

Weiner is president of Robert Weiner Associates News and Public Affairs, based in Washington, DC. •