Mr. Hardy, Decker’s Paint Shop Steward

Southridge Apartments Jackson Heights Queens New York

July 1958

If you search the internet for Southridge Cooperative Apartments in Jackson Heights in Queens, New York what comes up on is the description of sixteen apartment buildings built in the late 1950’s by Fred C. Trump Sr.

I began work on this construction project as a non-skilled laborer. It was my first introduction to the building construction business. First, I obtained, at the New York City Department of Labor office on Chambers Street the mandatory state required “working papers” for minors. I was a 16-year-old teenager living in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn several miles from Southridge. It was on the Southridge project during the summer months of 1957, 1958 and 1959 that I was paired with a 19, year-old freshmen from Lehigh University Fred C. Trump Jr. Freddy would be my mentor for the time I worked for his father. There are numerous stories associated with those years when Freddy and I worked alone and unsupervised cleaning up construction waste and debris after each of the various tradesmen had completed their work on the unfinished apartment units and the public spaces contained therein.

To save a dollar from having to pay union painters, Mr. Trump assigned the two of us to do some last-minute painting that was needed to finish off the storage and laundry rooms in each building. I am reminded of one such incident associated with this task that occurred during the summer of 1958.

Each six story Southridge apartment building contained 60 apartment units, 10 units to a floor. There were large laundry rooms in the basements equipped with coin operated washers and dryers. It was common knowledge among the workers on the job at the time that Mr. Trump was planning to buy and own the machines and Mrs. Trump was going to manage the operation, eventually, in all 16 buildings.

In 1958 the apartment units in the first three buildings of the second section on 92nd St. were ready for paint. The painting subcontractor Decker Inc. had more than 40 union painters on the job. Mr. Decker set up his paint storage and preparation area in the parking area in the basement of one building. Decker Inc. was a union shop and the shop steward’s name was Hardy. Mr. Hardy was a tall thin gangly man with a nervous habit of grinding the false teeth in his mouth. Hardy however was intent on enforcing union work rules. It was during this time that Mr. Trump gave Freddy and I a task that would be the root cause of labor unrest at Southridge.

I mentioned that the laundry rooms in the basement were unfinished in terms of cleaning and painting, and I assume, looking back on it now, that the basement finishes that was essentially cleaning and painting was not in Decker’s bid.

The laundry room was about 6’ wide and 15’ long. There were double steel doors. Two very small basement windows 10’ above the floor. Despite the two windows being open if the doors were closed air would not circulate properly. One must keep in mind that this was New York City in July. Not only was it hot outside, but inside the room the floors and walls were of finished concrete and fresh curing concrete gives off a lot of heat weeks after it has been poured. The washing machines had yet to be installed so it was just a large empty room. Mr. Trump wanted the floors and walls painted gray and so we were both given a roller despite union rules prohibiting their use in 1958.

As mentioned, Mr. Decker set up shop in the garage of one of the buildings that was already named The Brierly. Freddy and I had to pass through the large group of painters several mornings who were diluting with turpentine or some such thinner a perfectly good five-gallon can of fresh paint. Mr. Trump probably got a low bid from Decker for the work and Decker was making up for it by adding turpentine to increase the volume of a five-gallon can. The entire garage space had a strong smell of flammable liquid. Several of the painters were smoking oblivious to the danger of possible combustion. It did not take much skill to paint. Anybody who could hold a paint brush could find work.

I do not remember how Freddy and I got the rollers, two paint brushes for the corners and the five gallon can of grey diluted paint but there we were in the laundry room of the Brierly with the paint, rollers, brushes, and Mr. Trump telling us before we started...“Scrape and clean the floors before you start to paint…and keep the door closed because I do not want Decker’s shop steward to see you two painting.”

As we started to paint the paint fumes began to build. As the door was closed per instruction our eyes were soon starting to burn and as we both became lightheaded, we opened the double doors to get some relief because the air circulating in the hallway made it better. After a time and as we were finishing up the first of two coats on the floor we looked up and saw Hardy standing in the doorway.

“What the hell are you boys doing? Well, it was obvious what we were doing. We were taking away work from his union members.

Without another word he left us, and sometime later Mr. Trump came down to tell us to stop painting. Trump was mad, very upset. As it turned out the 40 or so painters at the direction of the shop steward walked off the job. They stayed out for a few days until some agreement or deal was reached. Trump was livid. I do not remember being dressed down personally by Mr. Trump for what happened, but I do know Freddy took the heat from dad for opening the laundry room door. That summer Freddy was always in his father’s sights for something he did or did not do.

The lost days when the painters walked was the most important thing for Mr. Trump. Never mind the toxicity of lead fumes and paint thinner, a respiratory danger posed to both his eldest son and the nephew of his partner. It was all about time and money. How to squeeze a nickel out of every opportunity.

We both had gotten very nauseous that day and our eyes continued to burn until we were able to get to an outside water hose valve where we could wash our faces. At the age of 16 what did I know about exposure to lead paint fumes and the harm it can do to nearly every system in the body. Were we not working for family who would always love and protect us? When money is involved, people lose their conscience.

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July 2022