Rick Sinding: Hello. I'm Rick Sinding. We're here at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for the Center on the American Governor. Today I am interviewing Ray Bramucci who served as commissioner of labor in the administration of Governor Jim Florio. Ray, welcome.

Ray Bramucci: Thank you. Nice to be here.

Rick Sinding: Let's begin with a little bit of your background. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? What did you do in your early days and how did you end up in political life?

Ray Bramucci: God, I don't know, but I grew up in Massachusetts— in western Mass, a little town called Ludlow I was born in, and we moved to Chicopee and at the age of 17 while I was a senior in high school I dropped out of school and joined the air force and that was my Rutgers. I just met all kinds of people who were really in the air force to avoid the draft and rather than going into the army they joined the air force or the navy.

Rick Sinding: What period was this?

Ray Bramucci: This was 1952. I was 17 or-- 17 on December 31st. I had to get a signature so my father could allow me and two weeks later I was in the air force, didn't even shave. I was a little boy and that was my education.

Rick Sinding: You spent four years in--

Ray Bramucci: Four years in the air force. I was a-- well, I started off being an aerial photographer and since I couldn’t take the rolls and the movement they put me in the lab where I developed color film from gun cameras that the fighter planes used to do and it was a proving ground command where they were testing weapons. So I spent four years in Florida dodging Portuguese men of war.

Rick Sinding: Sounds like fun.
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Ray Bramucci: Yes.

Rick Sinding: You got out of the air force mid '50s. Then what?

Ray Bramucci: Came home just to show my father I could get up in the morning, went to work as a power miller in a gun factory, then changed to being a tire builder in the U.S. Rubber factory. And I always had a feeling I wanted to go to New York and see the world and be with a couple friends I was in the military with so I came back to New York and I had no job or no money or anything and went to work in B. Altman, which was a upper-group retail store selling rugs. I once sold rugs to Billy Rose; I once saw Marilyn Monroe walk through the place; I was a real celebrity watcher. And while I was there there was a union organizing drive and while I left the store on Fifth Avenue I took a leaflet and I talked to one of the organizers and the next day I was told I was fired for being a union troublemaker. And I always had this feeling 'cause I-- even at an age of 21 I was assistant shop steward in the rubber factory.

Rick Sinding: You had been a member of a union during that period.

Ray Bramucci: As a kid-- just as a kid. I didn't know what the union was or-- well, I was reading New Republic, which I subscribe to, and there was an ad in the paper inviting socially conscious young people who wished to better the lives of lower-paid workers to call this number and see if they wanted to be trained as a union official and I called. And sure enough I got a call back and I was interviewed by four really old men, two Polish Jews and two Italians, both of whom spoke 11 words of English each but they used words that were almost English but they weren't and they weren't Yiddish either, they were just something that they had made up as they went along, and they asked me to come to school and they trained me for a year. That's where I met my wife; she was a secretary there.

Rick Sinding: When you say "socially conscious," did you consider yourself socially conscious--

Ray Bramucci: Oh, yes. I--

Rick Sinding: --or did the fact that they accused you of being a union organizer drive you into a union-organizing frame of mind?
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Ray Bramucci: I was always prone to be pro worker and not pro employer. I didn't identify with the employers; I always identified with people who worked hard. My father was a real hard worker and I knew that that was what I always wanted to be, a hard worker, whatever I did, and so emotionally I was pro union but I was a strange mixture in that class 'cause we had Bolshevik kids, Trotskyists. I was recruited by every variety of Trotskyist and Communist that there ever was in the world in New York and I always said no so I never was happy during a strike. My friends were but I kind of saw-- I always felt the pain of people who were caught in between and the difficulties that yes, I wanted to win but I didn't feel really great about it.

Rick Sinding: Did you feel as though the Bolsheviks, the Trotskyites were trying to draw you in, to convert you to communism or--

Ray Bramucci: Yes.

Rick Sinding: And you resisted.

Ray Bramucci: Yes. I had no interest in any kind of an ideology that was kind of hero worshipping. I was always an individual and I was always a little different; even among my friends I was a little different. I was an old man when I was 22. I thought about things and I was crudely educated, self-reading and debating and arguing with people that I knew and there were some vigorous debates and arguments, but out of that came who I am.

Rick Sinding: You complete this course and what happens then?

Ray Bramucci: Well, I go on a field trip first to Virginia to organize-- we organized-- had to organize a knitting mill in Roanoke. Then I came back for more education and they sent me out again this time to-- well, I started off in Georgia but then I was transferred to Mississippi, and the one noteworthy thing that happened in Mississippi was I was followed continually by the local gendarmes. And one day I came in to town near-- it was near Laurel, Mississippi, I don't remember the town, and I pulled in, angle parking. Of course, stupidly I had Virginia plates, which was right-- the same thing as having Soviet Union plates in Mississippi, and my wheel was on the line and I was arrested for I don't know what, they didn't tell me exactly, but I went to jail. And every time the union lawyer would try to get me out they moved me to another jail. I saw three or four really horrendous jails in
Mississippi and I finally got out and survived and came back and-- but was assigned in New York City.

**Rick Sinding:** Who employed you at this point?

**Ray Bramucci:** The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, which is no longer, which is a tragedy. It was a great union because it always saw its responsibilities as being consistent with good citizenship. They didn't have "me first" as an idea; they knew that whatever they did they have to do it in the context of advancing working people.

**Rick Sinding:** I didn't realize that the ILGWU no longer existed. When you drive in to New York heading to the Lincoln Tunnel there's a big sign, which I guess is Jersey City or maybe Union City, that says "Home of the International Lady Garment Workers Union for a Hundred Years or a Hundred and Twenty Years"--

**Ray Bramucci:** I didn't know that. Well, we've left a lot of housing. We built the Chelsea housing in lower Manhattan which-- we used the money that we had amassed in the health and welfare funds to build housing that would be within reach of the better-paying union members, they got priority but not necessarily was it exclusive, and that has remained a major source of good housing stock. And people laughed at us because the yield on those bonds was 1.3 percent and other unions were getting 7, 6, but we did it in a socially conscious way to invigorate the housing market for working people.

**Rick Sinding:** Chelsea doesn't need any invigoration now, does it?

**Ray Bramucci:** Yes. It's-- and that's what I identified with. I was a very happy man for a long time there.

**Rick Sinding:** What did you do in the ILGWU? You were with the ILGWU for a long time.

**Ray Bramucci:** Well, my first job I was editor of a eight-page monthly and I realized that the manager of the local who was a egomaniac-- the whole idea of the paper was to talk to members about benefits and duties and whatever, but the big thing was to have his picture on the front page, and I got real smart. I began to have two or three pictures of him on the front page and I became pretty popular,
but I-- at that time I represented members who were having problems with their rent-- their landlord. I would go to rent board hearings and represent them of course free of charge and of course all the landlords thought I was a lawyer, and we had a lot of success and that probably did more to help members than a lot of other things that we used to celebrate. We were there for them. We helped them with citizenship issues; we referred them to friends not in any kind of formal way when they got into trouble. I did that.

**Rick Sinding:** You were a union organizer for a long, long time.

**Ray Bramucci:** Yep, 22-1/2 years.

**Rick Sinding:** How did this morph into or lead you into the arena of politics?

**Ray Bramucci:** One day my wife and I were in a Huffman Koos store and we had an argument over an end table, and because we had that argument we ran into a guy, Jerry Breslin, who at that time was the county chairman of the Democratic Party in Bergen County and I had been COPE director there so I knew him.

**Rick Sinding:** COPE means--

**Ray Bramucci:** COPE, Committee on Political Education. I gave out checks to candidates that we endorsed and he said, "You're the guy." I said, "I'm the guy for what?" He said, "Well, Bill Bradley was just elected and he's looking for a state director."

**Rick Sinding:** This is 1978.

**Ray Bramucci:** Yes-- '79 'cause he had been elected.

**Rick Sinding:** He got elected in '78.

**Ray Bramucci:** That's right, it was '78, and being a Celtic fan I-- first the most basic fact of life-- he's a Knick and I said, "Wow," and I seriously considered it because I was getting fed up in that I was-- the industry was sinking, imports were destroying the standards, and I was on the front lines making most of the decisions and being criticized for them when they didn't-- weren't the best. Well, they weren't
the best 'cause we had no leverage so I was ready to go and my personality-- I eagerly accepted the responsibility without understanding that then somebody could "Well, look at that; look at this." Eventually, I got a call from Bill Bradley and I went to see him and I said to him first off that it's ironic that if he had run against Clifford Case I would have voted for Clifford Case who was then a very popular moderate Republican man of great dignity who didn't take a false step in his whole career, and he was defeated in the primary by Jeff Bell who at that time was a precursor of the supply-siders. And Bell won and Bradley won and their campaign did not have one nasty slur or charge. They discussed toxic waste dumps, renewable energy, the strategic petroleum reserve, and then they would debate this in front of people who didn't know what the hell they were talking about but that's the kind of campaign it was.

Rick Sinding: You did not get involved in the Bradley campaign or--

Ray Bramucci: No, I—

Rick Sinding: You didn't even know him.

Ray Bramucci: No, I didn't know him. I saw him at an AF of L-CIO convention in Atlantic City and I said to myself, "He's a pretty thoughtful guy. I like him."

Rick Sinding: You certainly must have known him by reputation at that point.

Ray Bramucci: Oh, well, I was a big fan of John Havlicek who was a Celtics star and they guarded each other, and Bradley later told me that Havlicek was the toughest guy he ever played against but I-- so I took the job and I came home-- he offered me the job, I came home, and I said to Sue, my wife, that I was going to go work for Bill Bradley. And Michael, my son, then was about 12 or 13 and Sue said to him, "Hey, your father's going to work for Senator Bradley" and he bolted upstairs and slammed the door, and I went upstairs and I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "Dad, all those years that Havlicek held-- that Bradley held Havlicek you let him do that and now you're going to work for him? He played dirty." I said, "Well, I'll talk to him about it but I don't know" and that was the story of my Bradley _______.

Rick Sinding: How well did you get to know him before he offered you the job?
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Ray Bramucci: I got to know him well but I think the best story that-- David Wald had-- was then the columnist _______ you all remember and Wall said to me one day, "How well do you know Bradley?" I said, "I'll tell you what. I know for instance that he lives in north Jersey in a one-family house."

Rick Sinding: That's a lot more than most other people knew at that point.

Ray Bramucci: Yes, 'cause he would take the circuitous route home, a very private person, but I got to like him and we didn't talk a lot about business. He educated me in the long times we spent on weekends when he was in the state; he was a hard worker. We started off at seven-- six, seven in the morning and didn't get home until seven or eight at night and he really made an effort to reach out, and he knew a lot of things that I didn't know. I mean I had no idea about the complexity of some issues and he used to boggle my mind but I knew things that he didn't know about life. So Pete Carril once, the coach of Rutgers, said--

Rick Sinding: Princeton.

Ray Bramucci: Pete said, "There are two Rhodes scholar. He's a Rhodes scholar, R-H-O-D-E-S, and you're a roads scholar, R-O-A-D-S" and that was our relationship.

Rick Sinding: I spent a week on the campaign trail with Bill Bradley in 1984 when I was writing for a magazine and literally spent an entire week everywhere he went. I spent a lot of time interviewing him, talking to him, trying to penetrate to get to know something beyond the superficial, and I have to say I never felt as though I got to know him. I could get him to maybe perk up a little bit when we talked about basketball. He actually did very occasionally want to talk about basketball but most of the time he wanted to talk about policy. He didn't want to talk about politics. He certainly didn't want to talk about himself and his upbringing and what motivated him. He wanted to talk about policy. Is that who he is and is that how even people who got to know him for a much longer period of time would describe him?

Ray Bramucci: Yes, although after a while I penetrated-- we spent so many hours together and I got to see him at his home. I went to his home in Crystal City, Missouri, and he was-- he showed his real humanity there. I met his mother and father and went into the gym that he played basketball in, and I remember he had told me once when the movie Hoosiers was on-- he says, "Ray, that movie's about
me except we lost the game." He showed me where his father, who was in a wheelchair, would sit at the games in the local gym and his father was a banker and the town was owned by Pittsburgh Plate Glass. So he was an only child, famous from the time he was 15, and unpenetrable. (sic)

Rick Sinding: John McPhee characterized him pretty well in a sense of where you are in terms of his basketball presence--

Ray Bramucci: Yes.

Rick Sinding: --and I often wondered whether that really captured who he is as a person as well as a basketball player.

Ray Bramucci: I think the book was very insightful. It was sort of a parable but it was true. He was a-- he always-- he was a Boy Scout first and foremost, duty, not doing anything that would be untoward. This is a guy who spent nearly three terms in the senate and never once introduced a special bill, never, and it was consistent with what he thought his duty was as a senator.

Rick Sinding: What were your responsibilities as the director of the New Jersey office?

Ray Bramucci: Without sounding grandiose, I ran the state. I said, "Bill, leave me alone. I know the state backwards and frontwards. I know the players. I won't get you into trouble. You take care of all the esoteria (sic) and all of the cerebral things. I'll get down and be with people and try to protect your flank" 'cause he didn't do that well. He was an amazing guy. I-- we went to a board meeting of the New York Stock Exchange one day and there must have been 60 people there at this long table, and later in the car he said to me, "How many names can you recognize in the list you got?" I said, "A few." He said, "Well, tell me which ones you remember" and I gave him about six. When he got to thirty I stopped him. That's the way he was. He had-- he's a brilliant guy in a-- in an academic sense.

Rick Sinding: During the time that you were working for him, did you have the sense that you were a representative of organized labor? That's an important constituency for any Democratic politician. Did you feel as though your labor credentials were part of what you brought? Did it help his relationship with organized labor that you were the person who he entrusted with the New Jersey office?
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Ray Bramucci: I think that-- to answer that question, I never thought of myself as a labor representative 'cause even when I was a labor representative I always thought of myself as a citizen first, it-- just the way I am. He didn't expect me to be a labor representative. I was his man and I absorbed his thinking and his style so that I could interpret him to regular people and certainly he's diffident and he's aloof and I'm a mixer and it was a good marriage.

Rick Sinding: Speaking of good marriages, Jim Florio, much, much closer to your upbringing than Bill Bradley, high-school dropout, goes into the military, was a boxer in the navy, worked his way up. Did you find upon meeting Jim Florio that you had an affinity with him because of your common kind of upbringing? I do want to get into some of the differences and similarities between working for Bill Bradley and working for Jim Florio 'cause I think they'd be fascinating.

Ray Bramucci: Well, Jim and Bill are much alike in their being totally committed to policy. They're both policy wonks. They're both highly informed about every issue, knowing the nuances and knowing where to go. I would say that Jim had more of an agenda as to what he wanted to do. Of course, he was the governor and a senator-- Bill learns quickly-- I'm interpreting now-- but he learned quickly he'd have to be there for 25 years to make any kind of an impact because of the seniority system, the committee system. When you see-- when you get elected governor of New Jersey the doors open and you're invited in to do what you have to do and he was a very activist governor and I admired him for it but I never got close to him--

Rick Sinding: You got closer to Bradley than--

Ray Bramucci: Yes. Oh, yes, after a while. Of course, I was with Bradley--

Rick Sinding: --Bradley a lot longer--

Ray Bramucci: --11 years and my relationship with Jim was very respectful. I probably hit the road more during the controversy of the tax-- when he raised the taxes than anybody in the cabinet because I thought he did the right thing, but I didn't think he did it in the right way but I thought he did the right thing.

Rick Sinding: Before we get to that, let's go back a little and find out how you made the transition from Bradley's state director to labor commissioner. What were your interactions with Jim Florio leading up to that?

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**Ray Bramucci:** Most of them were-- Jim's guy, Joe Salema - Jim's Ray Bramucci ]-- didn't like Bradley.

**Rick Sinding:** This is when Jim was in Congress.

**Ray Bramucci:** Yes, and we all-- we have disagreements about when to go somewhere, who's going to be-- all of these-- we-- things that don't amount to a hill-- a row of beans. There was not a lot of love lost. Between Jim and Bill there was a lot of respect. I said to Bradley after the '84 presidential election-- I said, "I'm getting ready to hit the road 'cause there's a limit to how many people I can talk to about airplane noise, about liver cancer because of the polluted water supply, etc., etc." At first it's a challenge and then after a while it gets to be like going to see Hamlet in seven different languages; it always comes out the same and I was kind of getting fed up and I said, "You know, Bill, if you had run—" I thought he should have run for President in '84; he was at the top of his game. I said, "I'm going to be looking at some stuff in the public sector." Well, the next thing you know Florio gets elected and Florio's main guy was Doug Berman if you remember. Doug Berman was named treasurer. Doug was Bill's—

**Rick Sinding:** Campaign--

**Ray Bramucci:**--campaign manager. He was a protégée of Susan Thomases of the Travelgate fame in the Clinton administration and I think Doug was the person trying to make a firmer connection between Florio and Bradley by putting me in there.

**Rick Sinding:** Was it Doug who approached you?

**Ray Bramucci:** No, I got a call from the governor.

**Rick Sinding:** The governor-elect--

**Ray Bramucci:** Yes. The governor-elect, yes, and—

**Rick Sinding:** Did he specifically have labor commissioner in mind--
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Ray Bramucci: Yes. Yes, he knew what I-- what he wanted me to do and I said to him, "You know, Charlie Marcianite hates me."

Rick Sinding: Charlie Marcianite was the head of the state AFL-CIO at the time.

Ray Bramucci: Yes. He said, "Well, you're going to have to go and see him and tell him you're the new labor commissioner." I said, "Oh, okay."

Rick Sinding: How did that go?

Ray Bramucci: Not very well, but he was a pro. He grinned and bore-- beared (sic) it-- he bore it well and that was four wonderful years because I-- there wasn't anything in policy that I ever had any question about with the governor. I think he was right on on almost every value he had and everything he did.

Rick Sinding: You would not second guess any of the decisions that were made in those first six months, the auto insurance, the assault weapons, the taxes, the education reform and so on.

Ray Bramucci: Style-- it's like the diver; he gets style points in the Olympics. His style points were three. He didn't have an appreciation for appearances. He was single-minded about the justification for doing what he wanted to do in the public interest. That you could not argue at all in my opinion but it's the abruptness and the inability to schmooze and to get people to understand why outside of the logic of you're-- why you're doing something it was a way of-- it's a different style. It's-- it-- he was doing it out of righteousness, not in the worst sense of that word but because he had looked at that issue and thought it was the right thing to do for the state of New Jersey and he did it, and frequently it not only caused difficulty in the state and things are always not what they appear. It looked to me like, and certain people have agreed, that on gun control, which he was absolutely correct about, the thing that brought him down by that little margin that he lost to-- the governorship was the National Rifle Association. They poured the money into the state and all those local anti-tax people were just paid lackeys for them. You could see it happening.

Rick Sinding: Did you mention this to the governor at any time--

Ray Bramucci: No.
Rick Sinding: --at any time during the time that this was going on?

Ray Bramucci: No. No.

Rick Sinding: Out of respect, out of-- Why?

Ray Bramucci: I talked a lot to Berman. Berman was like a son to me because I was director. There were a couple of incidents that happened during various times between he and Bradley and I knew how brash he was and I knew he lacked the same kind-- Lookit. I'm 78 years old. There's no time now to start pussyfooting around. I love the guy, he's my friend, I invite him to our house, but he lacked the same finesse that Florio did. He was not a schmoozer; he was "I got it. I thought this thing through and this is what it is and that's what you do" and the combination was deadly. In terms of public relations, not political values and public respect but the latter, the part about not understanding-- I remember once when the new formula came through on funding for schools the commissioner of education didn't have a clue what was in that proposal; he was lost and he came from Texas. And to show you how wrong he was he thought I was close to Florio so he used to talk to me about things and I'd look at him and say, "Whose eyes are you looking at this with?" Florio brought in other people to design this thing and never really did the homework on it. Dan Dalton one time I remember him in the governor's office; he was blowing his stack.

Rick Sinding: He was in the senate at the time.

Ray Bramucci: Yes, later became the secretary of state, but he didn't know exactly-- I remember him saying, "I didn't know that this new formula would increase taxes in Cinnaminson." He-- that part he didn't get, that the justice of equalization affected certain constituencies negatively, not that he didn't know, he just didn't credit it, but he was at least as knowledgeable about public affairs and the intricacies of policy choices of anybody you could possibly imagine in office, Jim Florio.

Rick Sinding: Did you feel as though you had sufficient access to him as a cabinet officer?

Ray Bramucci: No, I never tried. I saw this ________.
Rick Sinding: From him or people around him?

Ray Bramucci: Him and people-- at that time Perskie was—

Rick Sinding: Chief of staff.

Ray Bramucci: --chief of staff and Perskie was amiable and stuff but they were on another planet as far as I was concerned. He just said, "Ray, take care of this." That's all he said to me, "Take care of this."

Rick Sinding: Take care of what?

Ray Bramucci: Labor and public issues that are involved with the relationship between employers and employees, and at that time of course labor's effect in the public sector was getting to be more and more fire and brimstone and less and less substance 'cause they were losing members and what you had was a tension in the AF of L-CIO between the building trades who are the traditional guys who Marcian helped and represented and the public employees. And there was a tension there and they basically hated each other.

Rick Sinding: The NJEA was a very important constituency group in getting Florio elected and then a very important constituency group in turning on him mostly, as I recall, because of a specific part of the education reform that called for local school districts to pick up the full cost of paying for their pensions.

Ray Bramucci: Well, it was a little-- there was more to it. It forced the locals to come to grips more with the bottom line. I'll give you an example. We had a town meeting once in Fair Lawn and there were ten or twelve pickets out in front of the hall and they apparently were young teachers who had been laid off and there was a big stir and people didn't know why they were there and I found out why they were there. Well, the teachers' union decided to take the full wage increase, which was then I think seven, eight, nine percent, rather than take four percent and have everybody work. This offended me; this is not the way I see life being handled with justice. So you had these eight or nine people sacrifice so everybody else could get the top dollar, and that began kind of symbolically a division because they were using that as an excuse to be angry at the governor and did it publicly. And I did have a conversation with them about it. I'm not sure how deeply it sank in. It was a main issue for me but in the union-- I worked for it for 23 years-- our philosophy was we shared the work. When it got slow we went around the shop and found out
who could afford to stay home consistent with the manpower needs that the employer had, you needed this person and not that person, but we took care of it that way. And I know that it's a tradition in some unions that will never be changed, ever, but it's not something that I admire.

Rick Sinding: When you say that you more than any cabinet officer went out representing the administration in talking about the education reform and the tax reform, was this something that the governor called upon you to do? Was this something that you volunteered to do? Do you think that what you tried to do was, as you refer to it, the schmoozing that he and Doug Berman were not especially good at?

Ray Bramucci: They were brilliant but that was not their best, and I think I volunteered for it but I-- nobody ever said anything to me as the press came in. I would go to the New Brunswick Chamber of Commerce, the Cinnaminson Lions and in each place faced a lions' den of people who were yelling and screaming. I remember one exchange we had and this was in New Brunswick, right in this town, and this guy "These taxes are killing me." I said, "Which ones?" and it just so happened that the tax he was talking about hadn't gone into effect yet so I said, "Do you realize that that tax doesn't take effect until next June so how can it be killing you?" And the whole place got quiet, nobody cheered, but that was the impression people had, totally misguided and wrong about the facts, so I enjoyed that kind of banter.

Rick Sinding: One of the criticisms of the early Florio administration, the first six to nine months, was that all the decisions were reserved to this handful of people around the governor. One of those decisions was to have the state treasurer, Doug Berman, represent all of the departments of state government appearing before the appropriations committee. Do you recall this button that everybody from the administration wore at the Legislative Correspondence Club dinner that year saying "Ask Doug"; we don't answer any questions; everything should be represented by the state treasurer? Did you bristle at that? Would you have wanted to go before the appropriations committee and represent the labor department's budget rather than leaving it to the treasurer?

Ray Bramucci: You've heard me for half an hour. Do you think I did? ...I had so much to do I didn't take demeaning peshonally because the other side of that coin was I was left alone, just absolutely left alone to just carve it out and work at it.

Rick Sinding: No attempt to micromanage your department?
Ray Bramucci: No, none, one of the happiest four years I've ever spent in public life, but I told Doug one time 'cause he was going to make an announcement about education-- I don't remember exactly but it was a place the commissioner of labor should have been-- I mean commissioner of education-- I'm sorry-- but I said, "Doug, you're going to be handling all of this bad news. You are going to be the most unpopular person in the state of New Jersey in one year and I will tell you something. Nobody will be with you from the cabinet when you make that except me 'cause you're my friend." And sure enough that's what happened and he-- it was wrong _______. The coterie was too small. I guess the best way to describe this was I was quoted not by name but after a contentious cabinet meeting which the governor didn't show up at I was quoted as saying, "I feel like a mushroom, kept in the dark and have crap shoveled on me," and that's-- basically became a joke because it was driven by the coterie of people.

Rick Sinding: I knew that that had been your quote and I guess a number of people did but I don't know if this is the first time you've publicly admitted that it was you who made that statement.

Ray Bramucci: It's part of my legacy.

Rick Sinding: And I have to say I think it was fairly widely known who said that, but this did not affect your personal relationship with Jim Florio, which has remained pretty strong and friendly for--

Ray Bramucci: Many years--

Rick Sinding: --many years.

Ray Bramucci: 'cause I respected him. You've got to separate the style from the content. The content is a hundred percent; the style is lacking. It's just-- one day I said to him-- he had a pair of-- he used to wear-- in various meetings he used to wear a pair of half glasses and we were at Drumthwacket and I said, "You know, Jim, you ought to wear those out. You look great in them."

Rick Sinding: Scholarly I believe.

Ray Bramucci: To me-- well, people have their own interpretations but I thought he looked gentler because he was very serious and very hard-hitting, very driven,
and anything to soften that would be great. He just scoffed at it. It was window dressing and not worthy of any kind of respect. But that’s a guy who came up the hard way and understood the world, he did. And so whatever differences personally, the policy that he was in favor of was everything that I could think of if I were there.

**Rick Sinding:** One of the areas that he was always interested in, and I know that he and Carl Van Horn and you worked on a lot had to do with workforce development. That was a constant theme and led to the passage of the Workforce Development Partnership Act, which I think was probably the signature piece of legislation during the time that you were labor commissioner. Can you explain what that act was all about and what it accomplished?

**Ray Bramucci:** Well, it became the precursor to federal policy, which was passed when I got there, ironically. The first act I had as an assistant secretary was to go to the White House and be with the president when he signed the Workforce Investment Act, which was practically copied from-- Carl was the driving force and the knowledgeable person. We were lucky in New Jersey to have Bruce Coe there as head of the New Jersey Business & Industry Association, a person of uncommon decency and evenhandedness. And we got it done among other things, but we did other things that were very interesting and thought to be not possible. We reformed the workers’ comp court. We standardized the salary. We called for automatic review. When I got there in worker's compensation, for instance, there might be a judge making 60 grand and somebody two miles away making 92, and the guy making 60 was 3 times the judge that the guy making 92 was. But we straightened that out. That was because of Bruce was agreeable, and we got it done. We were the only state in the union that passed extended benefits for unemployed and paid for it out of our own money in the United States, and it was agreed to by the Business & Industry Association. They agreed. I gave them my word we would pay it back. We would refurbish the fund. But a lot of the things that were done there, increasing the minimum wage, the unemployment insurance, all those things, were because we had enlightened leadership in the business community.

**Rick Sinding:** Did you also have enlightened leadership in the opposition political party?

**Ray Bramucci:** You had a large number of decent, forward-looking minimally partisan members of the Republican Party.
Rick Sinding: I know that Governor Florio talks a lot about the fact that the second two years after a veto-proof republican majority had been elected to the legislature in some respects became very, very productive years because of the ability of the Florio administration, the democrats, to work with the republican majority in the legislature. Was that your experience as well?

Ray Bramucci: Oh yes, absolutely. There was none of this bloodletting about differences in what you said or what you felt. I mean, a guy like Chuck Haytaian, who was a bread and butter conservative republican, head of the assembly, he was a decent guy. He was a decent guy. You could talk to him about any part of your agenda and he might not be in favor of it but he wasn’t going to savage it. And that went for the senate. It was a gentler and more decent time.

Rick Sinding: And this is just generally a difference in attitude compared to today.

Ray Bramucci: Yes.

Rick Sinding: Do you find, though, in New Jersey that it is significantly less partisan than it is around the nation?

Ray Bramucci: I think so. I think it is, although some people in the legislature might not think so but I think it is. I had opportunity to be the first chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Ethics. I didn’t serve very long because I was working at Rutgers then, this hallowed institution. <laughs>

Rick Sinding: And my recollection is that you were the compromised candidate because nobody else wanted it.

Ray Bramucci: Right. Right. I never shied away because it was a chance to-- I had a lot of fun doing it because-- well, there’s a little story. I got a chance to tell our candidate for senator, Mr. Lonergan, to sit down and keep quiet, which was worth the six months I was there.

Rick Sinding: <laughs> Now when was this and what was he running for?

Ray Bramucci: It was a hearing and he had filed 14 complaints, and oddly enough they were all against democrats, ethics complaints, all of them against democrats.
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I found that to be very shocking. And he came to make sure this was going to get done, and he began to argue. And I said, “Mr. Lonergan, you’ve already had your say. This is not a public meeting. Sit down and keep quiet.” I got home and I said, “It’s worth it being in public life.”

<laughter>

Rick Sinding: A fellow Bergen County _______. Had you known him from way back from your days as <inaudible>?

Ray Bramucci: I knew of his reputation as being kind of a strange guy. I hate to say it that way, but it’s true, I think.

Rick Sinding: How did you wind up on a legislative ethics committee. I thought that legislative ethics committees were made up of members of the legislature.

Ray Bramucci: Well, I was the first civilian, and I could remember the first group of complaints the republicans expected me to just vote no on all of them as a chairman, but I didn’t because I thought a couple of them had merit and they were against prominent democrats. Codey asked me to do this and we never really had any agreement on anything. I just said, “I’m going to- it’s just be me,” meaning, “Y- you’re not going to be able to predict what I’m going to do.”

Rick Sinding: Codey is Dick Codey, who was the senate president at the time?

Ray Bramucci: Senate president. He and Kathy Crotty, who was then a very useful and very sensible—his chief, they asked me and I did. I served, and it was a very enjoyable time. Unpaid, of course. Most of my jobs were unpaid.

Rick Sinding: Well, not in labor commission.

<laughter>

Ray Bramucci: No, no, no. I’m trying to feel sorry for myself.
Rick Sinding: Those last two years, painful in many ways for several people who worked in the administration and felt that now everything was a challenge to deal with this veto-proof republican majority. You say that this was the most enjoyable four years that you spent in your life. Those last two were just as enjoyable as the first two?

Ray Bramucci: Yes, I have no recollection of any untoward disagreeableness. I got along well with the republican chairs. They didn’t subject my budget to unusual savagery. They were pretty measured, considering the political differences that were being escalated by the sweep. I thought it was mild compared to what I saw in Washington.

Rick Sinding: Did you feel less like a mushroom as the four years went on?

Ray Bramucci: Yes. Yes, because I learned that intimacy and consultation back and forth is not going to happen. It’s just out of the question. And it’s not due to anything evil. It’s just that’s the way it is, and so long as I was able to carry out my responsibilities with support, and he was always supportive. I mean, once I told him it was okay, that we had touched the bases, we got along fine.

Rick Sinding: What would you say were your greatest triumphs as labor commissioner and what were your greatest failings? What do you regret most about that period?

Ray Bramucci: Failings first. This is a little esoteric but permit me because this is part of the duties of the labor commissioner. We had a longstanding dispute among the building trades in New Jersey between the union building trades councils and a certain contractor who ended up being the contractor who built the extension in the tunnel into Trenton. The big bone of contention was that this contractor was union but he wasn’t building trades because back in the day when they were dissolving the mine workers George Meany said to the steel workers, “You’re going to take these miners,” who were carpenters in the south, especially, and the building trades at that time was notoriously racist. And so they had nowhere to go and so they formed this other union. Well, this guy had this contract with them. They were paid union wages, not building trade wages. And he was a very effective contractor, efficient, on time, under cost, but the building trades had a vendetta against him. And I came within three inches of settling it and it failed. And it involves a lot of things. We did a letter to the-- we took a position with the turnpike authority, for instance. This is one area I said, “We should not do this.” We took a position that in order to be eligible to be a contractor in New Jersey on the turnpike...
you had to be a member of the appropriate local building trades council, not union. Of course, it was thrown out the first time it got a hearing. I didn’t like it and it was selfish, and we almost settled it except right at the end some maverick guy with carpenters down with Atlantic City did something, and it was blown forever. And that activity is what I think I do, getting people of different views to not hate each other or to make a deal because it makes sense, but it failed. And that was important because it affects building trades and working people.

Rick Sinding: Manufacturing throughout the time that you were in office and certainly since then has gone from being a predominant activity in New Jersey to I wouldn’t say nonexistent but it certainly is virtually nonexistent. Was there anything that could have been done? Do you feel as though there was anything that you did during the time that you were in office to ease that transition from a manufacturing economy to a service economy?

Ray Bramucci: Well, I think the governor encouraged me and certainly-- there were three major automobile assembly plants in Jersey, one near Trenton that did seats and accessories in cars.

Rick Sinding: That’s Fisher Body for GM.

Ray Bramucci: Well, it was wholly owned by GM, and Toyota, Honda, all those companies had long ago bid that out. They didn’t own it anymore. It was not an efficient place. It was an old factory, and the workers and management didn’t get along. Another failure for me. And no matter what I did it didn’t work out. There was just so much bad blood. It was indescribable, and it ended up closing. But the two other factories, one GM in Linden and one Ford in Edison. We paid attention to those two factories in a big way. As a matter of fact this story will illustrate how much importance we gave it. GM was going to transition from cars to what are now SUVs and trucks, and this is a major overhaul. And we gave them $3 million to cushion the training period because involved in that were also new ways of robotically putting together the vehicle, and there was potentially a lot of trouble coming, and that was not a great place for labor and management relations. But The Bergen Record criticized me for allowing $3 million to be put into an automobile plant in New Jersey because they thought of it as kind of welfare. You’re going to give it to somebody who’s really about ready to die. We gave it to a company that made a choice when there must’ve been 30 separate bids that GM got to move that plant somewhere else, Mississippi, Tennessee, not unionized states. And so it became very important when there was a layoff at GM or the Ford plant in Edison the economy could be measured that it took a hit because of the compounding of...
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the wages paid and the suppliers and all of the subcontractors, so we paid attention
to that. And that union also turned around its attitude about management. Put
that aside now. We have the Ford plant. The Ford plant made a truck similar to the
one the GM plant made. In Ford it was the Ranger. They made it with 400 fewer
workers because the union earlier had a very strong leadership in making
accommodations with automatic devices, robots, and I spent a lot of time in that
factory. I got to know many of the workers. I now read their names in the obit
page of “The Star-Ledger.” But that factory went from 32nd in the Ford empire to
number 1 in efficiency measured by the complaints made to the dealer or to the
parent company by consumers. They made the best truck under the best
circumstances, and it became evident to me immediately that the union ran the
plant. The union did the hiring. They were right in the middle of the plant floor,
their office. and it didn’t mean that they diminished their support for the workers
an iota, but they took ownership of making sure that that truck was made the best.
So the plant manager said to me-- 20 years ago you’d go in a parking lot and you
wouldn’t see a Ford automobile. Well, you’d see some but you’d see all the foreign
cars. Now that’s all you see. They were buying their own stuff. So we have an
effect, but it was like trying to keep the garment industry in New York, futile. We
made so little that was almost poverty wages. But we made 10 times more than
they made in Bangladesh.

Rick Sinding: <laughs> That continues today.

Ray Bramucci: Yes. And it’s inevitable because that’s an industry where
discrimination and exploitation has always been the centerpiece because it’s done
on the cheap. And it’s very evident that that kind of policy by Ford was early in
recognizing that the welfare of the members of the union was inextricably tied to
the welfare of the company. That didn’t mean they have to give up everything. It
means that they have to function in a different way, and they did. And one of the
reasons there is not an automobile industry in the United States of America is
because of that trust that was engendered that President Obama could take
advantage of at the bargaining table because the union had to eat crow, make no
mistake about it. They had to establish a sub-wage under what the regular guys
do. And they affected some of the pension rights that were substantial, but they
made the deal. And now that’s the single growing manufacturing industry in the
United States, and people make a sustainable income. And they haven’t taken any
water in the boat, turned to justice for workers. It’s a better place to work, and we
were on the cutting edge of that because we encouraged them.

Rick Sinding: You had a reputation at the labor department of having a
particularly good senior staff. Want to talk about that a little?
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Ray Bramucci: Well, my experiences as a leader is you pick the right people and then you get out of their way. It’s kind of indicative of my approach. The two main people who I brought in were Oliver Quinn and Bill Foster. Bill was a professor here, psychology, and Oliver was a public guy, a lawyer, active in the Rutgers Law School, Newark Campus. I ran into him when he was the head of Urban League, and I used to keep a book of minorities who are sharp and who I think would be up to snuff. And I had his name in, and I liked Foster because Foster was a Congressional Fellow for Bradley.

Rick Sinding: Oh, okay. I didn’t know how you had known him.

Ray Bramucci: Yes, and I vetted him, actually, when he got there. I also vetted Ralph Izzo, by the way. Anyway, where was I?

Rick Sinding: Quinn and Foster.

Ray Bramucci: Yes, so I called him up. I hadn’t talked to Quinn in months. I said, “Oliver, I- I j- I was just named labor commissioner. Would you like to work for me?” He said, “Yes, I really- yes. In what- what position?” I said, “I don’t know. I got two major positions. I’ll let you know.” I called Foster and I told him the same thing. And then I told them together they ought to get together and tell me which one is chief of staff and which one is the assistant commissioner or deputy, and they worked it out themselves. They had never met before. Quinn became the deputy and Foster became chief of staff. Now, what I’m proud of is there were no defections in the four years. There are certain politicians that come into office with fanfare, and all of their chief supporters leave quickly. There’s a noteworthy candidate now for senator in the democratic party. His inner guard left him within a year and a half. Something is wrong. Means you haven’t found a good place for people. You’re not giving them enough to do and the authority to do it.

Rick Sinding: In fairness, that was Jim Florio’s reputation as a congressman.

Ray Bramucci: Well...

Rick Sinding: But not as governor.
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Ray Bramucci: No, governor-- there’s so much to do as governor. In the congressional office so much of it is a pecking order. It’s a microcosm of humanity at its worst. Who did the senator stop _________? Who rode in a car? Who was in the senate subway? You know.

Rick Sinding: Have you watched the show, “House of Cards,” the British program that’s been converted into an American series? It absolutely captures that.

Ray Bramucci: It captures it? I haven’t seen it. I probably will try to now that you’ve recommended it. But morale, it starts at the top. Either you establish-- you’ve got to establish trust that you will not second guess and make the person who’s taking the authority and initiative feel compromised. So I used to tell everybody below these two guys, “Look it. When you talk to them you talk to me. Don’t play games. If he told you that, I may even disagree. I agree. That’s what it is.” So we’re still very close friends because we did something, and then people did what they had to do. Bill took care of the building. Oliver was the guardian on the law, how it’s written, how you draft legislation. For instance, the workforce investment that Carl was so-- he was a critical person in the Florio campaign and office. He had the respect of everybody and he had Jim’s ear. Rare. He was a human being. A nice guy besides being a thoughtful guy. And he worked.

Rick Sinding: You must’ve had dealings with Carl Van Horn before your _________.

Ray Bramucci: Never met him.

Rick Sinding: Really?

Ray Bramucci: Never met him. And, you know, to show you how graphic this can become, John Heldrich, the respected and revered-- I mean, he’s an icon here in New Brunswick, former Johnson & Johnson V.P., and a great guy. A noted republican, had been named to the Employment and Training Commission by I think Governor Kean. And I got a couple of hints from the office in Trenton of the governor, not the governor, that “Maybe you ought to find somebody else.” There was nothing to it. He’s somebody that speaks straight. He knows employers and he’s sympathetic to workers. And he and I had a marvelous relationship even though he’s a Yankee fan, by the way, John Heldrich. But I wouldn’t think of it. I once got a call from one of the state senators, one of the administration people because he was some kind of a republican. Well, the only thing I knew about him
was in his private life he refereed basketball games. So I said, “Give me an instance of what ... this guy did to compromise his objectivity.” They didn’t have anything. “I can't do it. I'm not going to do it.” And that person was-- but it's not heroic. It’s just that’s the way you’ve got to do it if you’re going to keep people near you loyal to you and work hard without being told what to do.

**Rick Sinding:** You mentioned a brief mention of your time as undersecretary of labor in the Clinton Administration. Let’s talk a little bit about what your life has been since the Florio Administration.

**Ray Bramucci:** Well, oddly enough this Oliver Quinn story comes back because Oliver Quinn had been deputy solicitor of the Department of Labor. Now, the Department of Labor is the only institution--

**Rick Sinding:** This is the U.S. Department of Labor.

**Ray Bramucci:** U.S. Department of Labor. Is the only institution outside of the Justice Department that can file lawsuits. None of the other departments do. They give it to Justice. Labor you file your own lawsuits. So Oliver was the second in command, and the new secretary-- he worked with Bob Rush. The new secretary was Alexis Herman and she knew Oliver and she asked him to be the solicitor. And Oliver said, “No, I’m back home trying to establish my life again with my family,” and as he’s leaving she says, “Do you know anybody that could be assistant secretary for Employment and Training?” And Oliver says, “Yes, Ray Bramucci. Here’s his phone number.”

**Rick Sinding:** Now, this is after you had left the New Jersey Department of Labor?

**Ray Bramucci:** Yes, by three or four years. This is--

**Rick Sinding:** Oh, I didn’t realize it was that long.

**Ray Bramucci:** --1990. I was doing arbitration. I was teaching. I was doing a whole bunch of stuff like you’d have done. And next thing I know I get a call. I was living in Bergenfield at the time. And said, “This is so-and-so from the White House.” I says, “Oh, yes?” I was going to say, ”Yes, and I’m- I’m in uh.. Portugal right now.” But turned out I met Alexis and she and I hit it off and I was nominated. However, there’s a little story here, too, of course. There were many
other candidates. One guy was an official of the New York State AFL-CIO, made a speech on the steps of the state house in New York saying he was the next secretary. Now that office--

Rick Sinding: Not assistant secretary, the next labor <inaudible>--

Ray Bramucci: The next assistant secretary. He was about to be named. Now that office has discretionary spending when I was there of $13 1/2 billion. That’s not his budget. That’s discretionary. So he was a candidate. The AFL-CIO wanted him. There was a candidate from New Jersey who’s now in jail who also was a candidate. And I went to see Frank Lautenberg to get his support after I was offered the job. I said, “Frank, I need you to help me.” He says, “Ray, somebody-somebody’s telling you a story. It’s not going to happen.” I said, “Frank, I just left the Department of Labor, the secretary’s office. She offered me the job.” He says, “No way.” So we waited and waited and waited.

Rick Sinding: Did this position require senate confirmation?

Ray Bramucci: Yes, senate confirmation. And I got entangled in a problem that the secretary had with the Vidalia Onion Growers of Georgia.

<laughter>

Ray Bramucci: And I didn’t know what a Vidalia onion was. I know now. And I was held up for six or seven months. And I lost two clients. It was getting serious. We were at my daughter’s house and a phone call came in, and Frank Lautenberg’s A.A. says, “Ray, get home. You’re going to make it tonight.” Apparently Frank Lautenberg went to bat for me with a key White House staffer say, “We don’t get Bramucci, you don’t get this bill.” It was the night session. So we run home. I’m charged up, you know, local boy makes good. Senator Jeffords gets up to the lectern and I say, “So this is it.” He says, “I move the unanimous consent for the following nominations.” And I’m waiting, “Ray Bramucci.” “Number 126, number 328, 415 and 908.”

Rick Sinding: <laughs> And did you have any idea what your number was?

Ray Bramucci: No. I said, “I think I made it.”
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<laughter>

Ray Bramucci: She says, “How do you know?” I says, “I don’t know.”

<laughter>

Ray Bramucci: So I call the legislative people at the Department of Labor in Washington. I say, “What number was I?” She says, “I don’t know.” But I made it. On that impersonal note I expect you to crescendo, you know, the band’s playing, “My Hero.” No, I don’t remember what my number was, but it was an odd thing and it took me a while to get there.

Rick Sinding: And once you got there what did you do?

Ray Bramucci: Well, I hit the road. Basically the fellow who was there as the civil servant was a superb technician. His name is Ray Uhalde. He retired with great honors. He was the ultimate inside player with laws, with personnel, with everything. I said, “Ray, I have no interest in this. I have no interest in reading five-page summaries. I’m going to go out and see what happens when we give somebody $5 million to do something.” So I spent my three years on the road walking into centers, community centers, factories, union halls, social service agencies, to see. Because we had then become-- the Labor Department was given the authority to find jobs for the hardest to employ during welfare reform. And largely as a testament that ended welfare as we know it. And my old boss was against it, the Clinton approach with republicans. I liked it because there were parents along with the stick. We said, “You gotta work, but here, we’re going to do this until you- until you do,” and so that was a $2 billion program. I spent more time with welfare recipients than I ever spent with any group of people in my life in that year, all over the country. I heard their stories, and I learned, for instance, that welfare reform was not about workers or people who would be workers. It was about women. There were no men. The men were on local relief. So I learned, for instance, in L.A. I was meeting with a group of welfare recipients and their morale was sky high, sky high, because they were expected to do something and it wasn’t punitive. There was a balance. “You’ve got to get off your butt and get over here, and here’s what we’re going to do while you make this transition.” Well, there were about 300 people in the room. There are probably 500 or 600 apartments, and the building manager told me only one apartment was rented to a man, and he was a retired postal worker. Now, there were men in all those buildings, but because of the way the law was written they were avoiding responsibility to pay for the kids, officially. A lot of them were. So it was a very exciting time, and we freewheeled
and we tried to set an example and get out and push people in a way that was consistent with my beliefs about human dignity.

**Rick Sinding:** It doesn’t sound to me as though you had the same passionate enjoyment of that period that you did of the period that you were in the State Labor Department.

**Ray Bramucci:** Oh, I did. More time has gone by. Time, it’s like having sandpaper on experience. It just rubs away the high points. I was a very happy man, and I couldn’t believe that from my humble beginnings my mother and father-- my father went to the first grade in Italy and he was the family intellectual. My mother went to the fourth grade, and nobody ever expected me to be anything. They loved me and they knew I was a little smart, but their view of me was that if I paid attention to things and was a good person I could be the assistant foreman in one of these factories in town. Until he died my father had never understood what I did. He would just keep, “What do you do? Why do people pay you?” I said, “A- a lot of people want to know what- what the answer to that is.” But from those humble beginnings to end up sitting next to Janet Reno at a bill signing-- and I would know because Alexis Herman was thought to have something in her past and the attorney general asked for a special prosecutor, and Herman didn’t like that. and so she never liked Janet Reno. So if there’s ever any joint ventures with the Labor Department-- so I was sitting next to her in this program. Believe me. There are 28 signatures, people snapping pictures, and she said to me, “Mr. Secretary, whatever happens after this?” I said, “Probably nothing.” She said, “I thought so.” And at one point she had palsy, and it was bad. And she had her leg and right arm going like this. And I was sitting next to her and I looked over at her. She said, “It’s not as bad as it looks.” <laughs? She was a nice person, good person and an independent person. But having that ability to say, “Yes, I- I know her, yes. I- I’ve been there.”

**Rick Sinding:** Well, from what you describe as humble beginnings you did wind up being a visiting professor of Global Economics at Adelphi University.

**Ray Bramucci:** I tell you what. They throw away titles now.

<laughter>

**Ray Bramucci:** And I have no one listening to me. I went to Adelphi in the graduate program. They hired me to do a seminar, and I had about 18 or 20
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graduate students. None of them cared what I would say. They were there because their employer had said, “If you go and get a master’s degree you’re going to get a raise and you can be a- something else.” They had no fascination with the policy, with the intricacies, with the issues. And I used to think I liked teaching. After that experience maybe in the fifth grade I like it. But I taught at Montclair, at Rutgers. I was also the Director of the Prudential Business Ethics Center at Rutgers for two years.

Rick Sinding: And of the Institute of Work at Seton Hall?

Ray Bramucci: We founded that, and it consisted with my beliefs of building consensus with working people and advocating for their reasonable well-being and respect and responsibility. So I’ve been fortunate. I have no regrets. I don’t think I should’ve done anything that I didn’t do. What I did I tried to do the best I could. And that one piece of advice I always rendered, especially when I was dealing with at-risk kids, which remains my abiding interest, those kids, about 5 1/2 billion of them, who are out of school or out of work between 17 and 22 is, no matter what you look like, whatever shape you’re in, whatever color your face is, whatever language you speak or the languages you can't speak, if you work hard you’ll be respected.