THE CITY CONGREGATION for HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

"Heroes and Role Models: Bruce Morrow (Cousin Brucie)"
by James Ryan
October 22,2011

When I started to think about my heroes and role models, I first thought about the differences between heroes and role models and what that difference means to me. A hero is defined as: A person admired for his achievements and noble qualities; one who shows great courage.

I could think of many people who I consider to be heroes. However, I only really looked up to these people because of one particular thing that they did. Had they not done this one thing, then I would have never admired them. So I looked up role models as well, and the definition of a role model in the dictionary is: A person whose role in a particular field is imitated by others.

As I began to think about the difference between the two, I realized that, based on these definitions, I had many more role models than I did heroes, mostly because I had greater admiration for people who had done many commendable deeds instead of just one. I then realized that these deeds were not necessarily equally admirable, for example, donating to a certain charity versus finding a cure to a major disease. I finally concluded that I really looked up to people who were both heroes *and* role models.

With this in mind, I began to think of people who I looked up to who were courageous, and also worthy of imitation. Many came to mind, but I admired some more than others. I finally chose one person who I feel is worthy of imitation due to his courage, charity work, and ability to make people happy through broadcasting music on the radio: Bruce Morrow, or as he is better known, Cousin Brucie.

For those who do not know, Cousin Brucie is one of the more famous disc jockeys in the New York Area, who became popular by playing classic rock music from the fifties, sixties and seventies during his shows on Saturday nights for the past 50 years on stations such as WABC, WINS, and WCBS.

After writing a letter to Cousin Brucie and having it hand delivered to him by a friend of a friend, I was excited and astonished to receive a personal phone call from him one evening. I had the great pleasure and privilege of being able to interview Cousin Brucie. During the interview, I was able to ask him in great depth about his career, his Jewish upbringing in Brooklyn, his famous rock and roll shows at Palisades Park and Shea Stadium, his choices for charity, and the reasons why he supports the charities he does. Many of the choices he has made in his career and charity, he said, come from being raised as a Jewish boy in New York City.

Bruce Morrow, originally born Bruce Meyerowitz in October of 1937, was raised in the Midwood section of Brooklyn. Growing up on East 26th street with his mother, Mina, his father, Abe, and his brother, Bobby, he realized that he had a profound interest in radio and broadcasting from very early on, telling me that "I did not choose radio as a career; radio chose me as a career." During his years at James Madison High School in Brooklyn, he was selected to participate in an elite program

called the All City Radio Workshop, and took "Radio English" instead of regular English classes in high school. After graduating in 1953, he attended New York University, and went on to found the NYU radio station, a primitive station whose range spanned the campus, run out of a dorm room. Bruce said: "They didn't have a radio station, I built the radio station," when asked about his college radio experience. Many students and professors listened to this station, and predicted a good future in radio.

After graduation in 1957 and sending out audition tapes to several stations, Bruce accepted a job on the island of Bermuda at a station called "Zed BM." He worked for a year at that station, and many islanders liked his broadcasts. During his time in Bermuda, he earned the nickname "The Hammer" because of his booming voice and musical style. Many of the island people had never heard most of the American rock and roll that he played. When he began to play it on Zed BM, many listeners applauded this new, loud, and raucous beat. During his year in Bermuda, however, he was also confronted by the harsh reality of open anti-Semitism by many islanders. Probably the worst example was between Bruce and his landlady. A firm believer in keeping Bermuda "pure of Jews," she maintained that many stereotypes about Jews and their lifestyles were true. When Bruce told her that he was Jewish, she retaliated with bad meals and worse lodging, even though she had been very kind to him before she knew of his background. Many of his listeners also turned out to be anti-Semitic, and these people would tune their radios to other stations. These events hastened his decision to leave Bermuda and Zed BM.

After landing another job in Miami, he was quickly invited to become an on-air personality at WINS in New York City in 1958. The station played top 40 rock hits at the time. On WINS, Bruce became famous during his 2-8 P.M. shift by doing news, commercials and, most importantly, music. Playing musicians such as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry, he introduced many people to rock and roll, and was soon a New York radio icon.

While at this station, he coined the on-air name "Cousin Brucie," and still uses this name today. He adopted the name because a woman asked him one night for fifty cents as a fare for a train ride back to her home in the Bronx. The woman called Bruce "cousin," out of the belief that all people in the world are related. He went on the air later, calling himself Cousin Brucie, and the name stuck. He became famous and popular on this station, playing the top forty hits during his shows on Saturday nights. He later accepted another job at the legendary radio station WABC, where he was on the air for 13 years. During these years he became even better known internationally, with his broadcasts at night reaching countries in Europe and South America, and he was very popular in Peru! In fact, Bruce said "I became so popular in Lima, Peru that I was offered a job there." He managed to broadcast a show in Peru by playing "*Los top 40 hits de Nueva York en el aire con su Primo Brucie!*" Many of his Peruvian listeners were amused by his mispronunciations and bad grammar while doing advertisements, and they loved the music.

His fame was also galvanized when the Beatles came to America in 1964. During their first visit in 1964, he covered their stay at the Plaza Hotel and was later the emcee, along with Ed Sullivan, during their show at Shea Stadium in 1965, an event which he says is still the most memorable of his career. The energy and music that night "was deafening-you couldn't hear . . . we could have generated power." The phenomenon of the "British Invasion" spread like wildfire, with requests coming to Cousin Brucie from people putting on fake British accents and with requests for the latest Beatles song. This made the Beatles even more popular in America than they were before.

Following his long reign at WABC, Cousin Brucie left for a job at WNBC. Along with doing a music show on the radio station, he also did entertainment reports on NewsCenter 4, the television news. Later, he moved to WCBS-FM when it became New York's oldies station. He became popular with a whole new generation of fans yet again at this station, playing top hits from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Bruce said about his time at WCBS-FM, "I stayed at the station for 20 years, until they did a stupid thing." This "stupid thing" caused him to be let go from WCBS when the station changed to the "Jack" format in late 2002, a "ridiculous, non-humanistic, cheap format" that did poorly at nearly every station where the change occurred, not only in New York, but in Chicago, Denver, Vancouver, and other cities. For those who don't know, the "Jack" format was a radio station that intended to sound somewhat like an iPod on the "shuffle" setting: playing songs from different time periods at random, usually resulting in a confusing, disorganized mess. It was definitely unpopular with listeners, as the station eventually abandoned it and went back to a format more similar to the previous one, though it has never regained the ratings it formerly had.

At the time that WCBS-FM let him go, Cousin Brucie signed almost immediately with Sirius satellite radio, which later merged with its competitor, XM. He has been there for the past five years. He broadcasts two weekly shows on the 60s channel of Sirius/XM satellite radio, *Cruising with Cousin Brucie* on Wednesdays, and on Saturdays, *Cousin Brucie's Saturday Night Party*. He says he has no intention of retiring because he loves what he does, and will continue to do these shows regularly.

I admire Cousin Brucie for many different reasons. Among these are his courage and perseverance, his commitment to charity, and his benefit to society through the music he plays, which makes so many people happy.

Cousin Brucie has shown great amounts of courage and perseverance throughout his career. I mentioned earlier that, while in Bermuda, he was met by many islanders with open anti-Semitism. Despite all of this hatred, Bruce stuck it out and continued to broadcast for one year in Bermuda before returning to the United States. He also confronted his landlady, whom he knew to be anti-Semitic, risking whatever personal consequences she might inflict.

In addition, I admire Cousin Brucie because of his active devotion to charity. Many of his charity choices, Bruce says, were influenced by his Jewish upbringing. His obligation to help the needy has fueled his active work for charities, such as Variety: The Children's Charity and WHY-Hunger.

Variety: The Children's Charity is an organization that helps local non-profit organizations in neighborhoods throughout the tri-state area. The money that Variety raises goes to these groups to help children in need, disabled children, and also to help educate children in poorer neighborhoods.

Cousin Brucie's work for the charity began outside of the Ziegfeld Theatre on west 54th Street in Manhattan during the 1980s. Approached by a promoter, Bruce agreed to participate in a telethon for Variety the next day. He soon "fell in love with the grass-roots organization." He has stayed with them over thirty years, and served as chairman and president for over twenty. He still continues to actively support them and donate to the children that the organization helps. He says of his charity work, "I make things happen and I give, and it makes me feel good."

Cousin Brucie's work for WHY-Hunger (formerly World Hunger Year,) began while he was working for WNBC. After Bruce did a series of stories on his friend, the singer Harry Chapin, Harry asked Bruce to help him start an organization called World Hunger Year. The organization helps to

connect families in lower-class neighborhoods to affordable, healthy food in the United States. In fact, the organization has spent all of 2010 helping to pass the Food and Farm Bill, a bill that allows independent farmers to ship their products to lower class neighborhoods and "food deserts".

Bruce heartily agreed to help the organization. Ever since their founding, Cousin Brucie has helped WHY-Hunger by raising money through an annual six-hour radio-thon, during which rock memorabilia is auctioned off. All of this money goes to helping people in lower income neighborhoods. It is because of Bruce's devotion to a cause I also support and an organization that I admire, that I have decided to donate 10 percent of my Bar Mitzvah money to WHY-Hunger.

Finally, I admire Cousin Brucie for his place in American and international popular culture during the fifties, sixties and seventies. In addition to the activities I mentioned earlier, Cousin Brucie helped to introduce other groups to America while working at WABC. By introducing artists such as the Dave Clark Five, Herman's Hermits, and the Rolling Stones, he helped to create an iconic imprint of rock and roll upon the face of American culture. The new, energetic music helped to influence artists and fans all over the country and the world.

In conclusion, because of his courage and perseverance in the face of anti-Semitism, his active work for charity, and his ability to make people happy through the music that he broadcasts, I look up to Cousin Brucie as a distinguished hero and role model.