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Walt D'Alessio

By William Kenny

A LEGACY OF IMPACT IN PHILADELPHIA

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walt d'alessio

By William Kenny

It's difficult to imagine a Philadelphia without Walt D'Alessio, a farmer's son from rural Butler County, Pennsylvania, who ventured east in 1960 for an American Institute of Planners convention and has called the City of Brotherly Love home ever since.

Had D'Alessio – the former CEO and longtime chairman of the city's innovative public/private economic development partnership known as the Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC) – not stayed, Philadelphia might never have seen the rehabilitation of a shabby Colonial-era neighborhood into a hub of nostalgia and prosperity known as Society Hill; or the city's 40 million annual visitors might not be able to enjoy and appreciate Independence Hall in a noble, yet accessible setting fitting for the Birthplace of America.

Iconic Philadelphia companies such as Rohm and Haas, Crown Holdings, Tastykake and Dietz & Watson might have ventured elsewhere when looking to build or grow their headquarters. The city might still be struggling to chart its transition from the manufacturing-dominated economy of the middle 20th century to one at the forefront of thriving 21st century industries like technology and healthcare.

In a city famous for its salient public leaders, men like Richardson Dilworth, James

Tate, Thatcher Longstreth, Frank Rizzo and Ed Rendell, Walt D'Alessio's contributions aren't necessarily common knowledge among Philadelphia's 1.5 million inhabit-

ants. But he has worked shoulder-to-shoulder with them all, transcending administrations, bureaucracies and political affiliations while cultivating, seemingly effortlessly, a universal respect, admiration and affinity from his colleagues.

And at 82, he says he's not even close to done yet.

"At his core, Walt is an incredibly genuine, straightforward person who is full of integrity," PIDC President John Grady said. "Being from the Pittsburgh area, he's got that Midwestern quality about him. In addition, he's an incredibly smart person who has learned from his experiences. He is very open about sharing his experience and allowing you to develop your own while using his as a guide."

"I think he does care deeply about the city of Philadelphia, that it succeeds and prospers," said Liberty Property Trust CEO Bill Hankowsky, a former PIDC president. "And I think he also cares a lot about people, the interaction with people. It's a two-way street. I think it benefits him and keeps him engaged."

D'Alessio has served with PIDC for 44 years, including the last 34 as its board chairman. Previously, he served as PIDC's executive vice president and its president following an 11-year tenure as a project director and the executive director for the Redevelopment Authority of Philadelphia. D'Alessio has been a member of, in many cases an officer for, the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, the Counselors of Real Estate and the Council for Urban Economic Development.



Walt D'Alessio



View of Independence Mall after renovation by the Redevelopment Authority

A LEGACY OF IMPACT IN PHILADELPHIA

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He has served on the boards of Exelon, PECO, Brandywine Realty Trust, Independence Blue Cross, Pennsylvania REIT, Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh, American Red Cross, Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, World Affairs Council, Independence Seaport Museum, WHY? public broadcasting, Greater Philadelphia First Partnership for Economic Development, Diagnostic and Rehabilitation Center and many other corporations and non-profits.

He has been an adjunct professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and an adjunct at Penn's School of Fine Arts, as well as an advisor to the Business School of Temple University and the Department of City and Regional Planning of the University of Illinois. He holds an honorary Doctor of Science degree from Drexel University.

"I don't think there's any individual who has done more over the years to expand and diversify (Philadelphia's) economic base through both the public and private sectors than Walt," Mr. Grady said.

A TRANSITIONAL TIME

Like many great success stories, there was a transitional time in D'Alessio's life when he might easily have pursued a dramatically different career path, although his fundamental and resolute work ethic would surely have accompanied him wherever he decided to go.

He was born in Mars, Pennsylvania, a borough about 20 miles north of downtown Pittsburgh and home to 1,300 residents in the 1930s. His father managed the poultry department on a 1,200-acre farm just outside of town, and the family lived there. Later in his youth, the family moved to Pittsburgh's South Hills where his father purchased their own 500-acre farm.

"It was basically a hatchery. We were hatching baby chicks for all the other farms in the area. So my dad was basically breeding and selling chickens," D'Alessio said.

Years later, he took part in a broadcast interview for a University of Pennsylvania radio station and the interviewer asked him about his formative years. The host wanted to know what he was doing when he was 14 years old. His answer: "I said I was shoveling chicken manure."

"Everybody works on a farm. Your mother is working just like your sister is," D'Alessio said. "You're all hired hands and all have responsibilities that were assigned to you by age. You wouldn't drive a tractor until you were 12 or 13, but before that you would shovel stuff, gather



View of Society Hill looking East toward Delaware River

eggs, run the washing machine for the eggs. You could participate in the butcher work where your chickens are being dressed to be sold. All of that stuff. So it's a very early work ethic you're taught. Then there's time for education and a little bit of time for fun."

Farm life taught him another valuable skill that he would carry throughout his professional career and still does.

"The other thing was you had to be creative. When something broke, you had to fix it," D'Alessio said. "You weren't up the street from a hardware store or around the corner from a blacksmith. So you learned how to innovate and substitute and repair. That's a bit of what we're doing now. We kind of look at something that's broken and figure out what's the fastest way to get it operating again. Instead of a tractor, it's a whole neighborhood."

"That gave me an appreciation for reusing things. And we're in a wonderful period of time now in the cities for repurposing buildings and rediscovering waterfronts and recreation, so we're repurposing a lot."

He completed high school in the upper tier of his class, but he wasn't initially sold on the idea of college. His first summer after graduation, he worked for a local beverage manufacturer and mowed lawns for some cash.

"I told my dad I wanted to buy a '36 Ford, customize it and go to the drive-in every night," D'Alessio said. "He told me, 'That's good. I'm not going to help you.'"

But after a few weeks of humping 100-pound bags of sugar into a three-story mixing vat in oppressive heat, then realizing the absence of opportunity for long-term advancement, D'Alessio had a change of heart. He told his father that he had decided to return to school after all. He enrolled in the accounting program at nearby Duquesne University. Why accounting? It was the shortest line at the school's gymnasium registration.

"My dad said, 'If you had come into the gymnasium from the other direction, you'd have been a zoology major.' And he was right," D'Alessio said. "Anybody who's worked with me will tell you (accounting) is not my strong suit."

Like many great success stories, there was a transitional time in D'Alessio's life when he might easily have pursued a dramatically different career path, although his fundamental and resolute work ethic would surely have accompanied him wherever he decided to go.

After a year at Duquesne, he enrolled at Penn State University as a landscape architecture major because he thought it “would be fun and interesting.” He spent four years in Happy Valley, earned a bachelor’s degree and joined the Army to fulfill an obligation of his college ROTC program.

After his discharge from active military duty, he held positions as a public planner in Akron, Ohio; Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; and Wichita, Kansas. He also attended the University of Illinois at Champaign, earning a master’s in city planning. As part of his program there, he developed a sample zoning and subdivision code for small cities in the state.

“People were realizing there was growth and they had to do things to manage it appropriately,” D’Alessio said. “I was thrilled to know that I had a reasonable effect on the hinterlands of Illinois, at least.”

WORKING AT THE PHILADELPHIA REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

In 1960, D’Alessio traveled to Philadelphia for an American Institute of Planners convention with the expectation that he would accept a job offer from the planning commission of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in Philly’s northeast suburbs. He and a former classmate from Illinois traveled to the convention in D’Alessio’s 1955 Buick, stopping in Pittsburgh to see his family.

“The opening session was on a Sunday afternoon in the Philadelphia Museum of Art at the top of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. We walked in the front and there we were, in the Grand Hall looking at the statue of Diana with her bow and arrow,” he said. “And there were all these planners standing around drinking white wine and eating quiche and I said, ‘This is it. We’ve found it.’”

He ran into another old acquaintance there, Al Hart, who convinced him to forego the job offer in Bucks in favor of an opening at Philly’s municipal Redevelopment Authority.

“There was a lot of federal money flowing into the city. They were in the planning stages of a lot of projects. I knew enough about that to be pretty experienced at it, so he hired me right away to be a project coordinator.” His first job in January 1961 was to manage Washington

He describes the authority’s role at the time as an execution agency, responsible for implementing all aspects of a plan including land acquisition, demolition, redesign, financing and marketing. It was where the action was and where he wanted to be. PIDC serves much the same role today, but in a more sophisticated and efficient fashion, unburdened by many of the protocols required of a purely public agency.

Square East Number One, a rehabilitation of 480 townhomes originally constructed in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Over the years, the neighborhood overlooking the city’s downtown Delaware River waterfront had evolved into a hodgepodge of working-class housing and businesses. But for the visionary, it was a jewel in the rough.

The developers restored the exteriors to their Colonial splendor, while modernizing the interiors. They helped food merchants and wholesalers relocate to a new distribution center in South Philadelphia. They created walkways and pocket parks, and installed decorative street lighting to showcase it all. They chose to call the new section Society Hill.

At the time, Interstate 95 was still in the planning stages for the area. He worked closely with the legendary city planner and architect Edmund Bacon to ensure that residents would have full access to the river.

“Ed Bacon, who was my hero, he had this idea. They were going to elevate (the highway) and they would surface (the abutments) with stone, plant ivy and grow it there. I said, ‘That sounds good, Ed, but I don’t think that’s what I want to do. So he left us to our own devices a little bit,” D’Alessio said.

Instead, his team recommended a sunken roadway to preserve the waterfront vista, while spanning the roadway at grade level with platforms that would also help stabilize the engineering.

“It took a lot of negotiating, but that’s basically the argument we made. And that argument won the day,” D’Alessio said. “It was the right argument, the right day and the right people and it changed everything.”

D’Alessio possesses a subtle, but direct and pragmatic persuasiveness, according to Peter Longstreth, a real estate consultant, former PIDC president and son of the longtime Philadelphia City Councilman Thatcher Longstreth.

“He has a very interesting combination of very high principles and very strong feelings, but he doesn’t impose those ethics or personal policies on someone in a very

After his discharge from active military duty, he held positions as a public planner in Akron, Ohio; Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; and Wichita, Kansas. He also attended the University of Illinois at Champaign, earning a master’s in city planning. As part of his program there, he developed a sample zoning and subdivision code for small cities in the state.

heavy-handed way,” Longstreth said. “He does it in a way that’s very rational and non-judgmental. In a way, he’s very convincing in the case he’s trying to make without imposing.”

Today, those roadway platforms support public greens and monuments including the city’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the National Memorial to the Irish Hunger. And recently, he purchased a home in Society Hill, a project which proved to be the launching pad for many transformational initiatives.

“I went on to do Independence Mall, Washington Square West and some others,” D’Alessio said. “I became chief of projects for the Redevelopment Authority, which included work we were doing in North Philadelphia around Temple University and all of the expansion we did at Penn. We did East Poplar, West Mill Creek, Grays Ferry. And I became executive director. It was hands-on stuff.”

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PIDC – THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

PIDC is a nonprofit founded by the City of Philadelphia and the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce in 1958. Its mission is to spur investment, support business growth and foster development that creates jobs, revitalizes neighborhoods and drives growth throughout the city.

In 1972, D’Alessio planned to leave public service and transition into the lucrative private development sector. Thatcher Longstreth was the Chamber president at the time, having just lost the 1971 mayoral election to Rizzo, and was an influential member of PIDC’s executive committee. PIDC was looking for a new president. Longstreth recommended D’Alessio for the job and convinced him to pursue it.

“Rizzo said to me, ‘I want to meet you. I’d like you to be part of my administration. And I’m not going to screw around with anything that you’re doing,’ which was mostly true,” D’Alessio said. “He was a good mayor for what I did. He liked development. He would get organized behind the idea of a program and would make sure that his government was all on the same page moving things forward.”



Newly completed Gallery at Market East

Thatcher Longstreth, who died in 2003, and D’Alessio became fast friends. PIDC was the right place at the right time for D’Alessio to continue the work he had begun at the Redevelopment Authority.

“It was a period when the redevelopment programs were slowing down. The money wasn’t going to come flowing the way it had in the past due to changing priorities at the federal level. The interest in cities had waned a bit,” D’Alessio said. “We were also in a period of time when growth was slow in part because nobody was encouraging it in the city. So we were losing businesses.”

When he arrived at PIDC, the staffing was nine, including himself and his personal secretary. Today, it’s close to 60.

“We were very small, but we had a few people there who were smart and knew what they were doing. Everybody was busy. Everybody worked,” he said.

In that era, PIDC developed the Gallery shopping destination in the Market East section. It coordinated the expansion of public utilities and infrastructure in the city’s Southwest, which prompted the Eastwick development. The agency developed hundreds of acres of unused public land around Northeast Philadelphia Airport, along with properties in the Franklin, Callowhill East and West Powelton districts.

After a decade, D’Alessio became chairman and chief executive of Latimer & Buck Inc., later acquired by Legg Mason Real Estate Services and was elected to chair the PIDC board. He joined NorthMarq Capital in 2003 when NorthMarq acquired the mortgage banking division of Legg Mason Real Estate Services. He is now a principal of NorthMarq Advisors LLC.



Above: Rendering of Innovation District green space from Lower Schuylkill River Master Plan

Right: Rendering of Innovation District from Lower Schuylkill River Master Plan



2014 view of Broad Street entrance to The Navy Yard

Meanwhile, PIDC has cemented its status as one of the nation's leading economic development agencies. Its 1,200-acre redevelopment of Philadelphia's former U.S. Navy shipyard is about half complete and has already generated 12,000 new jobs. The agency is planning another massive project on the banks of the Lower Schuylkill River that would benefit from and support the growth of the city's medical and education sectors. He credits his successors in the PIDC executive office with carrying the organization to new heights.

"The guys who came after me have done a lot," he said. "I say to them when they come in, 'I don't want you to give any more than 10 years.' I've been there and after 10 years, you're trying so hard to do the detailed stuff, you're not going to be the visionary that's required. We've

had a series of really good CEOs after me: Joe Egan, Craig Schelter, Bill Hankowsky, Peter Longstreth. And the current guy, John Grady, is better than all of us. We got more sophisticated as we went."

In typical understated fashion, while traversing the streets and avenues of his adopted city each day, Walt D'Alessio doesn't stop, look around and ponder his uniquely significant impact on what he sees. He doesn't revel in those successes.

"It's sort of like what a mechanic feels when he gets the car running good," he said. "I'm a mechanic. I know how to get things running good enough to get the job done. There's nothing particularly glorious about it. There's no particular intellect that you need. It's just that I can see what things ought to be and can get them there." 🌐

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