

With Boots on the Ground, Virginia Code Official Rose to National Prominence

By Nick Reiher

Like World War II veterans of the Greatest Generation, the International Code Council and its legacy organizations lose more of its founders and early stalwarts each day.

Such is the case of the Aug. 14 passing of Joseph “Joe” Bertoni, 77, who had not only a long and distinguished career as Chief Building Inspector for Fairfax County, Va., but also helped shape the future of the ICC as an influential leader of the legacy organization Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA).

His contemporaries describe the garrulous Bertoni as among the last of a diminishing breed. He came across as a gruff, bear of a man, a native Italian with a lot of confidence in his knowledge of the codes, yet with enough respect for the new generation to listen to what they had to say.

“Joe was a man of the old world; a devoted family and religious man,” said Emory Rodgers, Deputy Director for the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, who knew Bertoni for 40 years. “He was a man who started out with boots on the ground and rose to a leader in the Fairfax Building Department and then a national leader in the model code development process by becoming the President of BOCA.”

ICC Board Vice President Guy Tomberlin, Branch Chief of Residential/Light Commercial Inspections in Fairfax County, worked in the same department as Bertoni from 1985 until he retired.

“What I remember most about him was that he really promoted the value of our profession through code development and service to the state and national organizations,” Tomberlin said. “We now call this ‘raising the profile,’ but Joe helped lead the way more than 30 years ago. He was an icon in this arena.

“He fostered a culture of professionalism, commitment and dedication to what we do in the code enforcement industry,” Tomberlin continued. “He worked tirelessly towards building relationships in all areas of the construction profession and we are still benefiting from his leadership today.”

Rodgers said his mentor made a difference by making sure people who worked with him knew he was all about safety and being involved.

“When I was a young building official in Arlington County, Va., he sat me down at a state meeting and told me how important it was for us youngsters to volunteer at the regional, state and then at the model code organizational level,” Rodgers said. “And he conveyed to me how important it is to pass that knowledge along to other youngsters.”

Former ICC Board President William Dupler, Deputy County Administrator for Community Development in Chesterfield County, Va., said Bertoni came across as “this big, tough guy, but he was genuinely a nice guy.”

“He wasn’t a big, tough guy to me,” said Audrey Clark, Acting Director of Land Development Services and Building Official for Fairfax County. “He could not have been nicer.”

When Clark was hired by Fairfax County in 1984 as a plans reviewer, there were not a lot of women in code enforcement. “But Joe took me under his wing,” she said. “He took me by the hand and helped me a lot. He helped me get to where I am today.”

Back in those days, Clark said, there wasn’t much formal training the way ICC offers today. Coming from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, she had a lot of questions.

“But Joe had me answering the phone, talking to contractors,” she said. “When they asked me a question I didn’t know, I took notes and called them back. Then I looked it up and told Joe, ‘This is what I think.’ That’s how I learned.”

Clark said Bertoni not only taught her about the codes, but how they were developed. And as Rodgers and Dupler said, he always nudged them to attend code hearings and learn how the process worked.

Bertoni learned from the bottom up. Born in Lucca, Italy, his family moved to the Washington, D.C., area, where he later became an apprentice and journeymen union carpenter. He wound up in Fairfax County as Chief Building Inspector, helping to develop the first Virginia Building Codes in 1973.

He served on numerous trade committees and groups, including BOCA, where he was president from 1991-1992. Bertoni was at his best while moderating code hearings, Dupler said.

“He was a large Italian guy with a big, booming voice,” Dupler said. “Joe relished that. He let people know he was in charge.”

Dupler said Bertoni was on the panel when he was interviewing for a job in Fairfax County. The questions were so basic, Dupler remembered, Bertoni had a hard time keeping a straight face.

That continued a few years later when Bertoni, as outgoing president of Virginia BOCA, swore in Dupler.

“He started laughing, and then I started laughing, and we couldn’t stop,” Dupler said. “He just loved life.”

Though they would grow to be great friends, Rodgers said their first meeting was under horrific conditions, the collapse of the 26-story Skyline Plaza apartment building under construction in Fairfax County on March 2, 1973. Fourteen construction workers were killed and 35 others were injured. Investigation showed removing the shoring too soon from the concrete pourings caused the collapse.

Rodgers, then Arlington’s Director of Buildings, said Bertoni called him to ask his opinion of what happened and where to go from there. He asked not only for his own knowledge, but because Rodgers likely would be getting calls from media and others wondering if the same thing could happen in Arlington.

From there, Rodgers said, Bertoni made it his mission to make sure nothing like that would ever happen again in Fairfax County or anywhere else. He said Bertoni helped beef up codes focusing on concrete shoring. And he set up a team in Fairfax County to oversee large-scale developments, making sure nothing made it through the gaps.

Bertoni had no problem asking others their opinions on important issues.

“He was a very humble man, down to earth,” Rogers said. “He and I grew up in rural areas. He knew his weaknesses. And he sought friendships with people who had skills that could help him offset those weaknesses. He learned from them.”

That doesn’t mean he always listened, or didn’t give the other guy some heck from time to time. Rodgers said sometimes contractors would tell Bertoni, “Why do we have to do this in Fairfax? They don’t have to do this in Arlington.”

“So he would call me up and say, ‘What are you doing over there?’” Rodgers said chuckling. “And I would tell him. And sometimes we would disagree, and he would respect that. We never let that interfere with our families getting together.”

An excellent golfer (with two holes in one to his credit), Bertoni also enjoyed sitting around talking shop with his cohorts. Rodgers said he would tell war stories about what was going on in Fairfax County. Or maybe the most recent battle he had in a friendly war with the fire marshal.

Even after he retired, Bertoni would moderate some of the BOCA code hearings, accompanied by his wife Jean. Clark said he would pop in every so often just to see how she was doing.

Rodgers said he’ll miss talking and getting together with Bertoni and his family, as he did some six months ago. Jean had just about talked her husband into moving to a retirement community near them.

“He didn’t want to move for a long time,” Rodgers said. “He built that big house with his own hands. And he was proud of it. But it was too big just for the two of them.”

Bertoni knew at the time he had lung cancer and was getting treatment, Rodgers said. He had been a pack-a-day smoker until he quit 15 years ago. But Bertoni’s health took a turn in the past few months. Rodgers said he saw his longtime friend a week before he died.

“He said, ‘This is a helluva way to go.’”

But Rodgers said Bertoni left a legacy with his passing.

“He was really dedicated to his profession,” Rodgers said. “Joe took his role in code enforcement and safety very seriously.”