



**Dr. John M. Baracy**

*by Kristine Harrington*

*SUSD Public Information & Marketing Officer*

Born in Detroit, Dr. John Baracy moved to Scottsdale in 1984 to become deputy superintendent of the Phoenix Union High School District.

“I chose to live in Scottsdale because of its great reputation and its reputation for a very good special education program. I've always been very grateful for the staff at Scottsdale Unified School District and what they did for my daughter. And, for my son, too.”

Following Phoenix Union, Dr. Baracy became Roosevelt Elementary School District's superintendent, during which time the district was the lead plaintiff in *Roosevelt v. Bishop*, a landmark case ultimately decided in favor of the plaintiffs that tackled gross inequities in school facilities and finance.

“It took seven years, but we won that case, and it made a difference for children and communities here in Arizona, and that is the legacy that we're all very proud of and made a big difference for kids.”

From there, Dr. Baracy went to Tempe Elementary School District as superintendent, where he developed a marketing program that became his template for Scottsdale Unified School District.

“In Tempe, we redesigned the organization, and we created the marketing department, where we increased enrollment from out-of-district children. Then I came to Scottsdale Unified School District, and the community was split, north versus south. There was a lot of talk about a sixth high school. So people asked me what would be the first thing I was going to do when I became superintendent, and I didn't know. It was pretty intense then, and I said, “Well, the first thing I'm going to do is listen.””

Dr. Baracy says he spent the first 100 days as SUSD's superintendent listening to internal and external stakeholders and studying the organization's culture before taking a plan to the Governing Board.

“I told my team, we're never going to say north/south again. It was developing and redeveloping, because words matter – words matter, in leaders, in leadership. We wanted to go forward, unifying our district and get back to what was important: that was education and kids, and we said, we can agree to disagree, but we're not going to be disagreeable. If we're disagreeable, you lose your voice at the table.”

Dr. Baracy was unique because he knew Scottsdale Unified as a parent first.

“I always admired Scottsdale school district, as an educator and as a parent. And I always found it hard to, to believe that there are so many good things that sometimes got lost in these discussions that went on at the time. I felt often that the reason that there was this noise, as I

called it back then, is because, it gets louder when people feel they're not being heard. It was important that we listen and that we tell our story.”

Enrollment was flat or slightly declining during this time, so Dr. Baracy decided his focus needed to be on marketing the district.

“That is the worst-case scenario for a school district, when you're flat or declining. That's the slow death on the financial vine, if you will, when you're flat or declining. It's rough. We were laying off staff. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to keep quality teachers. We had quality staff. I knew that because I was a parent, I knew we had a good product. I knew we had a good product, and it was selling the product and getting the word out.”

He made it the job of each and every employee to be invested in growing the district's enrollment.

“So, we, I, started this in Tempe and brought it to Scottsdale. I had this idea that, okay, we're going to have 3,000 employees distribute 150,000 flyers on a Friday before school starts on a Monday, that says, ‘You can't learn if you're not in school,’ because at that time, we found many students in Tempe and Scottsdale didn't show up the first two weeks.”

SUSD employees hit the streets in the dead of summer with 150,000 door hangers in hand and a mission to meet families and grow enrollment.

“We only have one choice. We're going to help ourselves, and here's how we're going to do it. So, what we said, we said, okay, we know what our enrollment is projected to be. If it's higher, we're going to split the money that we get equally, not percentage wise – equally. So, the Transporter of Learners, which was the bus driver, one year got \$500. I got \$500. And I'm telling you, 500 bucks for a Transporter of Learners is a lot of money.”

He says two things happened: 1) they increased attendance on the first day of school and 2) they developed 3,000 ambassadors for the district.

“It just wasn't just the marketing department, or me, or the leadership team. I mean, it was it was 3,000 employees sharing our story and the importance of being in school. And that's how you build capacity, see?”

That fall, the district passed a bond measure, resulting in all the five high schools being renovated. Still, tough conversations about consolidation and school closures were entertained during Dr. Baracy's tenure.

“We had two of the schools in the developing area Redfield (or Zuni) and Aztec. Both of those were well under 50%, or lower. We built one too many schools there. So we recommended that those schools unify, that they consolidate. In fact, my last day was a public hearing that night on consolidating.”

“I would just say, not with hyperbole, I believe Scottsdale school district, in my opinion, it's a district that has had a wonderful history and continues to have a very good reputation. The district and the community taxpayers, the business folk and the staff, all should be very proud. It's a great school district, in my opinion, the best in the state, bar none.”

Dr. Baracy says he can thank his mother, who was once Lee Iacocca's secretary at Ford Motor Company, for his approach to leadership. “She said he always dressed well and always treated

people well, and so I tried to live by that mantra. You know the saying: 'I don't remember what you said. I don't remember what you did. But I remember how you made me feel.' So I always tried to live by that, and I can thank my mother for that."

It is the reason why he looked at job titles and tried to find ways to instill greater honor and meaning to them. For example, the front desk receptionist became the Director of First Impressions and the bus driver became the Transporter of Learners.

"We were trying to change the culture. We wanted everyone to feel valued for the role they played. Remember, words are important. So that's why we changed titles in certain positions because, not to be fancy, like Scottsdale can be fancy-schmancy, okay? No, no, no, no. That's not why we did it. The purpose of it was to change the culture, how we view ourselves, what we value."

He also looked to the district's logo as a way to better unify the district and make all feel connected. The logo was redesigned. The mountain peaks were meant to reflect the community's different views or perspectives across the district. He also decided that the word "Unified" in the district's name should be italicized. It is still part of SUSD's logo today.

"I remember saying 'unified' means not only unified K-12, but unified in that we are *one*, and I tried to create that atmosphere where we would be united."

Dr. Baracy credits his undergraduate degree in Business Administration as his reason for approaching education leadership differently, working first in the business office at Eastern Michigan University and rising to become director of university budgets. He then became director of finance for Wayne County, Michigan's Intermediate Service Agency before heading west to Phoenix Union High School District, and ultimately retiring from Scottsdale Unified School District.

"I like to still be involved in leadership. I facilitate a program with some colleagues. It's called the Superintendent's Collaborative Network. It's for first-year superintendents. It's a collaborative effort with AASA and ADE and Grand Canyon University. First-year superintendents get a mentor they can confide in and ask questions, or discuss issues with. We have seminars and discuss current and emerging issues. Then they graduate to what we call the Superintendent's Leadership Forum."

Dr. Baracy says he is still SUSD's greatest cheerleader. He's proud of the district he once led, the district that educated his children.

"Would I work for Scottsdale schools again? Oh, yes. In a heartbeat. Yes."

"Everything I did in education, I would do over again. I have no regrets. I have no regrets coming to Scottsdale at all. Watching from afar (as a parent), I always had this vision that someday I might be their leader. And I enjoyed every moment here."

"I believe in servant leadership. I was given the torch, so to speak. I was given this gift. And this may sound hokey, but I was given this gift, and I cherished it. And I protected it. And I attempted to improve upon it. And then, when I left, I left. I left on good terms. It was a great experience, a great run. I had my time, if you will. I had the gift. And then I passed it on."