

# THIS FEBRUARY, THE WALK TO WASHINGTON TURNS 80

## LONGTIME PARTICIPANTS SHARE THEIR MEMORIES

By Diana Lassefer Drake



Gov. Brendan Byrne has attended the Walk to Washington 50 times. During the Walk of 1959, “Gov. Meynor told me he was going to make me the prosecutor of Essex County,” he said.

Simply put, New Jersey’s best business networking event of the year is the annual Walk to Washington and Congressional Dinner. What makes it great for participants is the powerful memories the trip leaves – and of course the contacts they gain. So as the 80th annual walk approaches, on Feb. 16 and 17, we asked some veterans of the event to share their Walk to Washington memories.

Bill Dressel, the retired executive director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, recalled getting to meet President Clinton during the 1993 Congressional Dinner. “It was the first time I met a U.S. President,” he said. Ralph Izzo, the chairman, president and CEO of Public Service Enterprise Group, recalled the President George W. Bush impersonator who at least one member of Congress in the dinner audience thought was the real President. And Gov. Brendan Byrne said it was during the train trip of 1959 that he got a piece of exciting news. “Gov. Meyner told me he was going to make me the prosecutor of Essex County,” Byrne said.

For the uninitiated, the Walk to Washington is not a walk exactly. But it is a moving networking event. Hundreds of

the Garden State’s movers and shakers board a chartered Amtrak train at four different stops in New Jersey, and cruise down to the nation’s capital, walking the train aisle and shaking hands along the way. Once in D.C., guests attend receptions that culminates in the Congressional Dinner at the historic Marriott Wardman Park hotel. The second day includes a breakfast networking event followed by a mellow charter train ride back home. From door to door, the conversations and the business card exchanges flow.

The Star-Ledger has called it “A time-honored exercise in extreme networking.” The Philadelphia Inquirer said it is “Like a power lunch writ large.” And the website PolitickerNJ said the train ride gives state leaders “across the ideological spectrum a once-a-year opportunity to network, all in the privacy of a steel tube hurtling down the tracks at 80 miles per hour.”

In other words, “If you want to meet people and you want to know what’s going on in New Jersey, you go on the Chamber’s Walk to Washington,” Gov. Byrne said. “There’s a built in camaraderie.”

## HERE ARE SOME MORE MEMORIES FROM LONG-TIME RIDERS:



### ► Dennis Bone

Director, Feliciano Center for Entrepreneurship,  
Montclair State University  
Former President, Verizon New Jersey

#### **18-time attendee**

"What stays with you is the phenomenon of more than 1,000 people on that train networking and walking the car. You literally have hundreds of conversations. Some are friendly and hold the promise of new connections and community. Every year it's a marvel. I have a theory that our effectiveness is enhanced by the community we have around us. Not one day of the year is more impactful than the Walk to Washington in respect to building and enhancing your network."



### ► Diahann Lassus

President, Lassus Wherley & Associates

#### **Five-time attendee**

"In the early years when I did the Walk to Washington, I was able to spend quite a bit of time with Sen. Frank Lautenberg [who passed away in 2013]. He was always one of my favorites because he supported women in business and women's rights. He was a true believer in equality. It's an incredible opportunity for connections. You have so many intelligent, driven people all in one place. That doesn't happen very often."



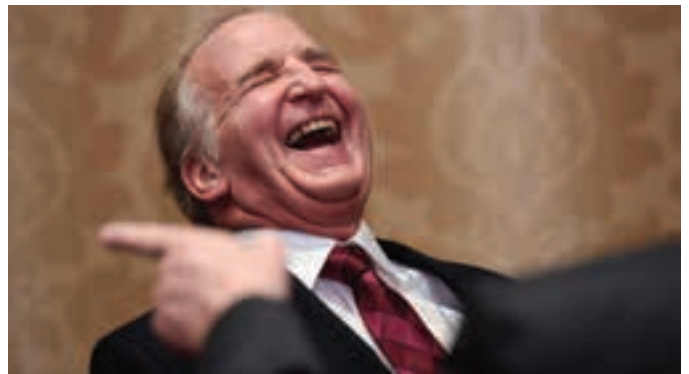
### ► Ralph Albert Thomas

CEO, New Jersey Society of CPAs

#### **16-time attendee**

"The N.J. Society of CPAs was the sponsor of the train ride in 2008, and had close to 100 CPAs on the train. Some of our younger emerging leaders did a survey on the train about whether or not people were prepared for retirement. A couple of 20-somethings had

the opportunity to spend quality time with then-Gov. [Jon] Corzine talking about the profession. In Washington, we hosted a special late-night event with a lounge-type atmosphere that kicked off around 10 p.m. It was a different feel. We got a lot of kudos from folks to have that kind of format with couches, lounge chairs, nightcaps and conversations."



### ► William Dressel

Retired Executive Director, New Jersey League of Municipalities

#### **42-time attendee**

"I was young in my career and I was at one of the evening receptions prior to the dinner. I was standing in line for a drink and this gentleman was standing behind me. We struck up a conversation. We were speaking about a Giants football game and had an engaging conversation about the Legislature. It turned out to be Gov. [Richard] Hughes [the 45th governor of New Jersey from 1962 to 1970]! I admired his writings and his philosophies of government. Years later, when he became attorney general, he was speaking at the League conference and remembered me. I was aghast! I also remember when Bill Clinton spoke during the Walk to Washington in 1993 after he was elected to his first term. It was the first time I ever met a U.S. president. You get to meet so many people in a more relaxed atmosphere. I never begin the train with an agenda as to what I want to accomplish. I have an open mind and let the train come to me."



### ► Linda Bowden

New Jersey Regional President, PNC Bank

#### **Six-time attendee**

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"During my very first Walk to Washington, I tried to go from one end of the train to the other. In my walk, I stopped to talk to this woman I had never met before, and we had things in common. We exchanged cards, got together for lunch, and she became a PNC client and a good friend. That woman has introduced me to several other people who have become clients. Anyone who goes on that train is receptive to this type of opportunity. These are people who want to make connections and further their business agenda. And we are there to support the state of New Jersey."



► **Ralph Izzo**  
Chairman, President and CEO, Public Service Enterprise Group  
**20-time attendee**

"Once in Washington we had a President Bush impersonator. I remember that one of the members of Congress did not realize until after the presentation that it was not actually President Bush. The event is valuable for us because we get the unfiltered perspectives of our customers and our prominent policy makers, be they NGOs, government reps or other influencers, all in one place. It is so important sometimes to speak to the people who are being quoted in New Jersey's media outlets. My only hope is that the people at the end of the train are not the same year after year, because I never make it that far."



► **Gov. Brendan Byrne**  
New Jersey Governor from 1974 to 1982  
**50-time attendee**

"During one of my first trips when I was a nobody, I was seated next to U.S. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan Jr. That was a great privilege. During the train trip of 1959, Gov. Meyner told me he was going to make me the prosecutor of Essex County."



► **Amy Mansue**  
President Southern Region, RWJBarnabas Health  
**12-time attendee**

"It's a great opportunity to see people outside the general run of Trenton and the committee structure and to get to know them on a different level. I look forward to spending time with Gov. Brendan Byrne. He and his wife Ruthie sit right in the front. It's always a wonderful time to catch up with him. He is so sage and funny, and even in the most difficult times he helps you to see the other side of the coin."



► **Michael Egerton**  
Executive Vice President, Government Relations,  
New Jersey Chamber of Commerce  
**22-time attendee**

"I always tell politicians at any level of government: If you're looking to run for office, you need to do 'The Walk.' If you're going to make an impression and kick off with the business community and the media, you're going to need to work that train; give out a tchotchke, button, or something with your name on it. This Walk to Washington coming up will be a real banner year and is already generating buzz. We have a new president and candidates who are seeking to run for the New Jersey governorship in 2017. I've always enjoyed that the trip has a nice mix of big and small business, politicians and local government. One year, Gov. [Chris] Christie said, 'The year doesn't begin until the Walk to Washington.'" ♦

To register for the Walk to Washington and for more information, go to [www.njchamber.com](http://www.njchamber.com)