

A story of how the middle class was built

Special Kenosha showing of 'Brothers on the Line' tells Reuthers' unique labor history

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Sasha Reuther talks with past United Auto Workers Local 72 president John Drew during the Wisconsin Labor History Society annual conference Saturday at Local 72 headquarters. The event included a screening of Reuther's documentary "Brothers on the Line," about the founding of the UAW

. (PHOTO BY CHRISTINE VERSTRAETE)

By Christine A. Verstraete

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New Yorker Sasha Reuther proved that the words "labor history" are far from boring at the screening of his award-winning 2012 documentary, "Brothers on the Line" Saturday at the United Auto Workers Local 72 hall on Washington Road.

The documentary — which explores the lives of brothers and labor/civil rights leaders Walter, Roy and Victor Reuther — was shown as part of the Wisconsin Labor Historical Society's annual conference.

As A grandson of Victor, 39-year-old Reuther said making the film was more than a labor of love.

"It's funny," he said. "This is a piece of history that had I not grown up in this family, I would not have learned about it in school. I felt if I didn't get him on tape, it would disappear. In the back of

my mind, I always knew I was going to do something on the family. He told some wonderful, dramatic stories.”

“It’s a story that has so much significance for how the middle class was built in this country,” said former UAW Local 72 President John Drew. “He gives us lessons that we need to do more in the future. We need more unions, not less, in this country.”

The film shows how the Ford industry in Michigan tried to keep unionizers out through hired security in its “Service Department,” mostly thugs and criminals willing to violently get their message across. The Ford Motor Co. was unionized in 1941, but that didn’t end the violence, as union strength grew and threatened the graft and illegal gambling overseen by the Detroit mafia at the time. Walter Reuther survived after being shot through the window of his home in 1948. Victor Reuther lost an eye after an assassination attempt a year later.

Walter P. Reuther was international president of the UAW from 1946 to 1970.

The 80-minute film touches on historic moments like the relationship between the Reuthers and the Kennedys, and the surprising relationship Walter Reuther had with President Lyndon B. Johnson.

“My grandfather was outspoken against the (Vietnam) war, but Walter as an elected official, even if he wanted to speak out, his hands were tied,” Reuther said. “Johnson makes phone calls to shore up his support after Kennedy was shot and one of the first persons he calls was Walter. I was halfway through making the film before I knew this was possible to see how far Walter has climbed and how he’s being tugged by many sides.”

Reuther said another surprise came when he and his editor realized they needed a narrator to connect some of the scenes. A union contact who once had worked with Martin Sheen gave Reuther a number to call. “I left a message on the answering machine and five minutes later he calls me,” Reuther said. “I barely got two words of the description in and he said ‘your great uncle Walter was my biggest hero.’ I’m floored. In the Sixties, he had been a supporter of the farm workers movement. He agreed to do it at base salary.”

The film won several awards upon its release in 2012 and is now available on DVD (<http://www.BrothersOnTheLine.com>) or streaming thorough Netflix, iTunes, Google Play and Amazon.

Reuther also enjoys speaking at schools occasionally and is especially glad to have the film distributed by an educational company for school viewing. He feels he’s done his job when he hears younger students say they understood how the civil rights movement grew out of the union rights movement of the 1930s.

“All they wanted was dignity in the workplace,” he said.

The film has been a turning point for Reuther, as well, who has been working as a historic researcher locating and compiling archival news at CBS News the past two years. He loves working with archival footage and still hopes to do another nonfiction film project.

“I think I listen more, especially to older statesmen,” he said. “I think I open my ears more than I used to. There are a lot more stories that need to be told.”