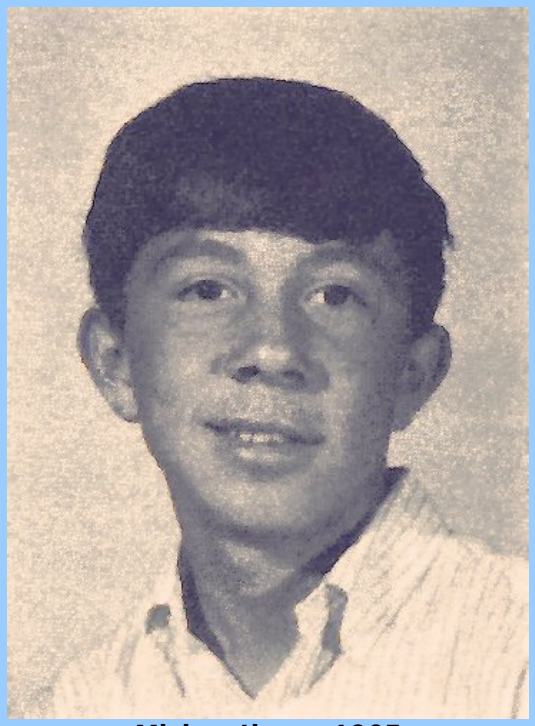
Brigham Young Academy High School
BYH
Brigham Young University High School

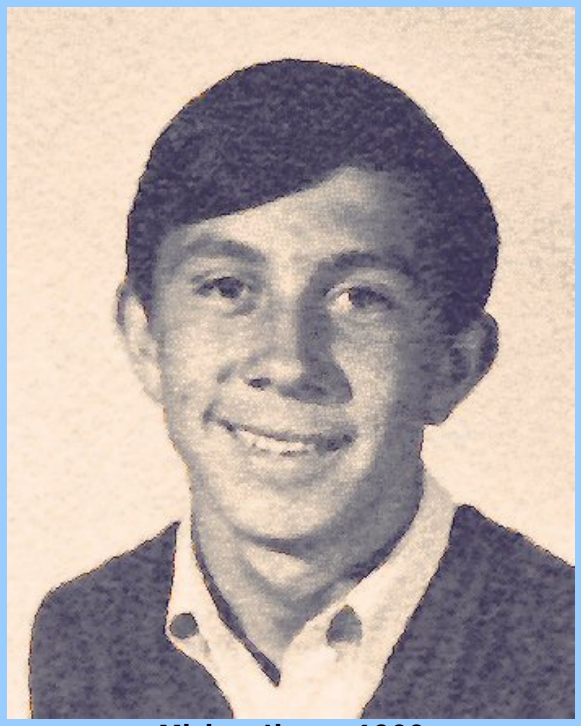
Mickey L. Ibarra

Government Consultant & National Hispanic Leader

Brigham Young High School Class of 1969



Mickey Ibarra 1965



Mickey Ibarra 1966

Mickey Ibarra was a popular student leader, athlete, at BY High during the 1960s. He was also on the newspaper staff and yearbook staff. But before graduation, as the following story explains, Mickey moved to California with his brother, David, where they attended Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento. There Mickey was elected Senior Class President in the same year that his brother was elected President of the Junior Class. Mickey is married to Frances and they have a 25-year-old daughter. Mickey Ibarra is now an influential figure in Washington D.C. political circles, and his brother David is a successful businessman in Utah.

Reclaiming Remnants of the American Dream

By Pam Ostermiller, 1997

It is always difficult to pinpoint where a story begins. How far back does one look to find the origin of fate, when one crucial event changes lives and determines the paths that a family follows?

For brothers David and Mickey Ibarra (pronounced Eee-Baura), their story could have begun a century ago in an Oaxacan village of Zapotec, populated by Mexican-Indians. It could start with the tale of their father, Francisco Ibarra, who traveled across the border and headed north to Salt Lake City, Utah, where back-breaking labor as a migrant farm worker was the first step toward fulfilling the American Dream. Or, perhaps it was a more recent turning point, when Bonnie Bird, the 17-year-old mother of two small sons made the choice to place them in what she regarded as the more capable hands of foster parents.

When the close-knit Ibarra Brothers reflect on the past, they give credit to dozens of people and events for helping them move along their very different paths of success. David, 45, after numerous ventures in the restaurant business, now finds himself in a senior management position at Henry Day Ford on Redwood Road in Salt Lake City, with a plan in his back pocket that could revolutionize the way Americans look at buying and selling cars.

And Mickey, 46, who on June 6 joined the staff at the Clinton White House as the new director of intergovernmental relations and as an assistant to the president, previously paid his dues for 13 years as manager of international relations for the National Education Association.

This story of two, poor Hispanic boys growing up in the mostly white, mostly Mormon Utah of the 1950s and making it, is not only about overcoming racial prejudice and economic barriers, but of knowing where you come from and pushing the limits of where you can go. And not only is it a story with an unclear beginning, but it remains to be seen where it will go; the Ibarras aren't finished yet.

Platitudes & pancakes

From his father, Francisco, David Ibarra recalls that he received hope. "I can remember the lectures," he says. "He would put me on one knee and my brother on the other knee and talk to us about achieving success. He would hold out his hand and say that any success we were going to have was in our own hands and if we succeeded, we would have to thank many

people. But if we failed, we were only going to have ourselves to blame." From a 1990s perspective of cynicism and confusion about national and personal priorities, the words might register as only platitudes. But in the recollections of David Ibarra, they roll off his tongue as something precious and profound.

The father who gave this advice was very young, a man who left Mexico when he was 15 years old. He didn't speak a word of English except for "pancakes" which he ate for a month until he learned to augment his vocabulary and his diet. He was a migrant worker, picking in fruit orchards, or harvesting potatoes in the fields of Cache County. He served overseas during the Korean War, then came back to Salt Lake City to work for Kennecott Copper on the demolition crew, which left him completely deaf in one ear and partially deaf in the other. After 15 years of lighting sticks of dynamite and "running like hell," Francisco attended the Salt Lake City's Hollywood Beauty College on the G.I Bill and became a hairstylist. With another Kennecott miner named Tino, also Hispanic, he opened up Franky and Tino's Beauty Salon, a move Mickey likes to call "from bombs to bangs."

While living in Salt Lake, Francisco met Bonnie Bird, a young, sandy-haired Caucasian woman from Salina, a farming and shepherding community in central Utah. Directly against the grain of extreme intolerance toward interracial romance and marriage (not yet eradicated from present-day Utah), they were married and began a family. Soon after, Francisco was drafted, sent overseas and left Bonnie to raise two boys alone. They divorced.

Going against the grain

Their mother gave David and Mickey a new life, but had to give them up to do it. "To me, she played the most courageous role of anyone while setting the events into motion," he says. Bonnie "had to decide whether she wanted to try to care for two kids, knowing she wasn't going to be able to provide them with the kind of start she wanted," David says. "Or, she could choose to make the most difficult sacrifice a woman can make in her lifetime—that is to give up her children for someone else to raise."

Bonnie placed the boys in a home where she had lived, in the care of the same foster parents who had helped raise her—Cecil and Ila Smith of Provo, Utah. David says he and Mickey were told she wanted to give them a better beginning, a home life with two parents and family values. "She had enough common sense and maturity to go against the grain. She did the right thing," he says.

After Bonnie left the boys in the care of the Smiths, they stayed for about a year and then were sent by the state to live with a Hispanic family, Joe and Sally Gomez, in downtown Midvale, in a small, rickety house near the railroad tracks. After four years, Francisco had remarried and wanted custody; the boys were uprooted once again. For one more year, they had temporary stability, then their father's marriage went sour. This is when, David believes, destiny stepped in.

Wanting to belong

"I remember it was Easter, and we were in this clothing store in Sugarhouse with my father, buying Easter clothes. It was like it was meant to be—we ran into Ila and Cecil Smith," he said. "Ila let out a scream clear across the store and I said 'Who is that woman?' She came running over and grabbed me in a bear hug and was crying her eyes out. Next thing I knew, we were back at the Smiths."

David didn't want to be there, but Francisco said, "This is better for you. I want you to have the kind of background that is going to help you all your life. I can't give that to you."

Hard work, honesty, responsibility, sensitivity and respect are the values Mickey says he and David inherited from Ila and Cecil Smith. In the Provo home of the Mormon couple, living with up to six other kids at times, life was very different for two young Latinos.

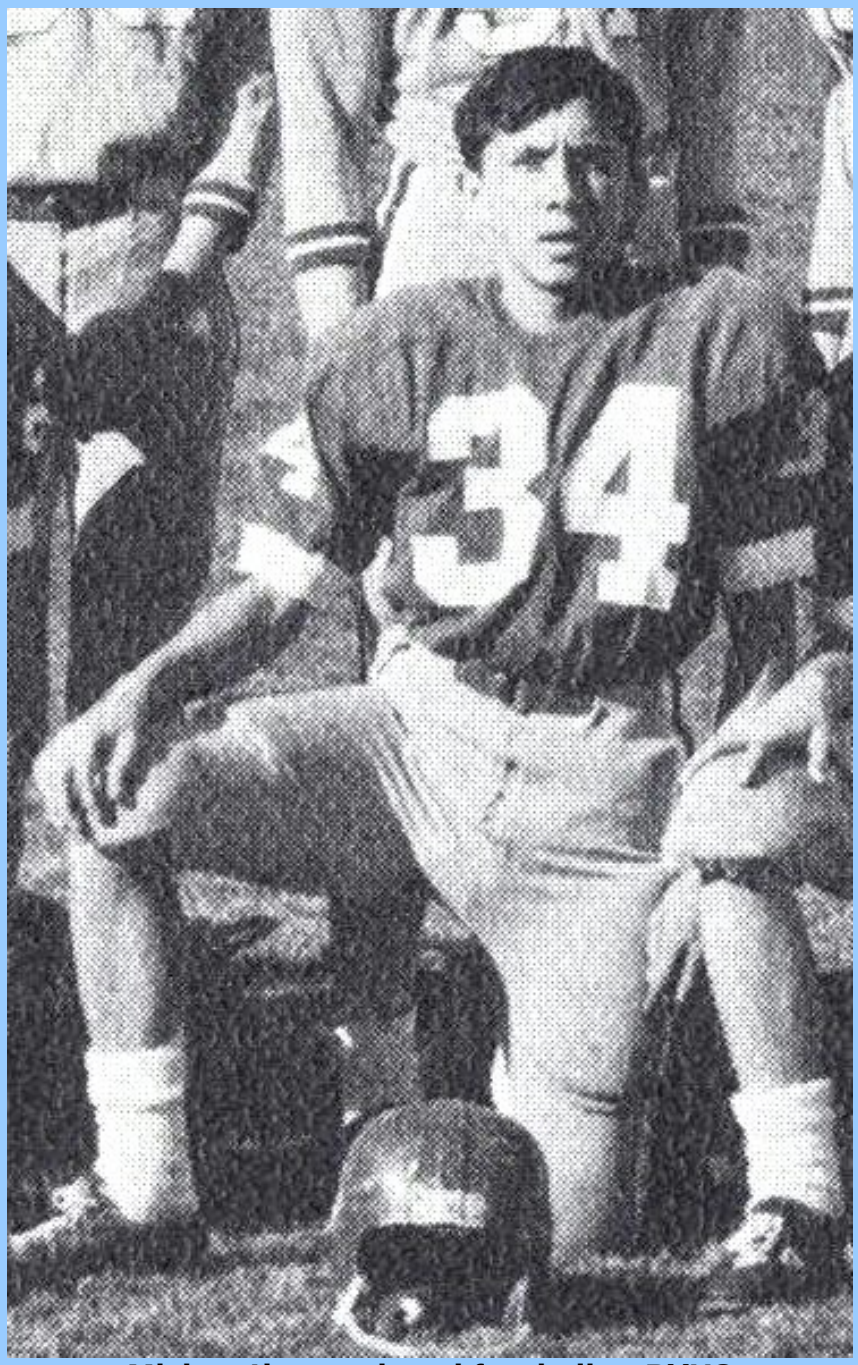
David, with skin darker than Mickey's says, "I think for me, my earliest memory was truly wanting to belong and I knew that I didn't."

Both David and Mickey felt like they were the Smith's kids. They credit Cecil, a crane operator at Geneva Steel and Ila, a housewife, with having the most ultimate influence on their lives. Memories of the Provo years, for Mickey, are fond. "I'm an optimist by nature. But there were hurtful times, the little things," he says. Like the countless times when both adults and children alike would ask, "Why is your name Ibarra, when you're living with the Smiths?"

David says neither he nor his brother want to lose contact with the hurt that structured their character. But "my brother doesn't spend much time in the past. He chooses to look forward. Yet for a Hispanic kid growing up in a 99 percent Caucasian environment in Provo, Utah—well, let's just say it's not the most progressive part of the nation—you always have a feeling of wanting to belong to something." (As recently as 1990, according to census reports, Provo was still only four percent Hispanic.)

Mona Lisa's smile

Although Mickey quickly assimilated into the community, it wasn't as easy for David. Mickey was very well liked, played football at Brigham Young High School.



Mickey Ibarra played football at BYHS

**Mickey Ibarra
(far right)
was a student
leader at BY High
even in Junior High.**

David, on the other hand, was constantly getting into trouble — having fights with other kids. As the brunt of prejudice and the target of racial slurs, David fought back. Instead of sharing his feelings about the name-calling and the conflicts with the Smiths or other adults, "I shared my fist on their chins."

Mickey and David were sent to different schools. "We were so close, it was almost unhealthy. I didn't want to do anything unless Mickey was there," he recalls. "My memory, is that Mickey was in the front, he was always protective. Mickey always had that big brother responsibility that my father instilled in him at every visit."

But not even the love of the Smiths nor the protection and support of an older brother was enough to keep David in Provo.

"There was trouble and more trouble," David said. He decided, at age 14, he had to leave. "Finally, I told Ila and Cecil I had to leave or I was going to die here." The Smiths called and arranged for David to catch a bus to Sacramento, where Francisco had a thriving business in the Mona Lisa House of Beauty.

Mickey says he could have stayed in Provo indefinitely and been comfortable there. Therefore, after calling David "a few choice names," Mickey asked him if he really wanted to go. David said yes. Mickey then reacted in a way that has been emblematic of the brothers' dedication to each other; he told David he wanted him to know that he didn't want to leave, but said, "If you leave, we're going together."

During their teen years in a more diverse and tolerant Sacramento — where their dad's beauty business success smiled on them — the leadership skills Mickey later exemplified in his professional life began to emerge. David described him as "head of the family," even comforting Francisco when relationships with women didn't work out.

Dishing it to David

“Mick was the most mature. When I got in trouble in school, he was the one who dished out the punishment,” David recalls.

Francisco was working a 60-hour week, turning his salon on Florin Road into what became a 30-year business. “My father,” Mickey says, “seemed to get his parenting skills off of 'My Three Sons' or 'Leave it to Beaver.' It was great.”

And, as his natural talent for teaching became evident later in life, Mickey showed guidance early, pushing David to get involved in school. When Mickey was a senior class president of Luther Burbank High School, David was the president of the junior class.

“Mickey always challenged me,” David says. “He was never short for words. He would stand up and take control of any situation, whether it was the Mexican - American Youth Association or the president of his class. And he would challenge me to do the same — so I reluctantly did.”

Thirty years later, life is much different for the Ibarra brothers. In contrast to their younger selves, scrambling for roots and stability, they are pillars in the local and national Hispanic communities. In both 1995 and 1996, Mickey was chosen by Hispanic Business Magazine as one of “The 100 Most Influential Hispanics in the US.” David has moved from the shack by the tracks into a sprawling, spacious home in South Jordan, swimming pool included.

Both brothers speak of nothing but the future, of the success and accomplishments to come, for them and anyone else ready to try. David seeks to make everybody understand that it doesn’t matter when you start to want to succeed. The important thing is choosing to start.

Determined, not disadvantaged

But what is the real source of such hope and perseverance? It is true that David and Mickey’s father was a living, embodiment of the American work ethic with a determination to triumph. And yes, the boys picked up core values from living with foster parents Ila and Cecil Smith.

But some folks look at the Ibarra brothers’ saga and see only a deprived childhood, a sad story, with an inexplicable happy ending. Individuals aren’t supposed to be confident and enthusiastic under the circumstances of a stressful upbringing, since studies show former foster children live difficult lives burdened by mental illness, alcoholism, depression, jail convictions and financial troubles. In 1995, the New York State Council on Children and Families reported half of all surveyed homeless youth were raised in foster care.

Disadvantaged? Mickey never viewed it that way. When both boys followed their own paths back to Utah, life got sweeter. Mickey served three years in the army and went to Brigham Young University — on the G.I. Bill, just like his father. He earned a bachelor’s degree in political science with an emphasis on behavioral disorders (which, he jokes, has helped him

survive in D.C.). He had a winning career in education, starting an alternative high school for troubled kids in Utah County and specializing in teaching emotionally handicapped kids at Hillcrest High School in Salt Lake City. Mickey became active in the Utah Education Association, where he realized the power of elected and appointed officials.

In 1984, he began his 13-year tenure with the National Education Association, in Washington, D.C. Mickey "has always been a go-getter," David observes. "He believes in trying to make a difference. He understands people. He fits in at a neighborhood pub talking to blue collar workers as well as he fits in at a presidential ball."

On President Clinton's behalf, he has done a lot of "fitting in." He's worked for personal access to the National Governors Association, the National Conference of State Legislature, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Association of Counties and the Education Commission of the States.

From hothead to healer

After conquering the hot-headedness of his youth, and moving back to Utah, brother David has steadily climbed from financial insecurity to business success in the private sector. After working for six years for the Marriott Corporation's restaurant division, he bought Farrelli's Ice Cream Parlor in Fashion Place Mall in Murray, and opened The Meeting Place Pub/Café, where he became the first restaurateur in Utah to acquire a class "C" beer license for use in a shopping center.

These successes led him to open two additional restaurants at Fashion Place — Thatsa Pizza Poncho and El Numero Uno. Once the "food court" movement began and mall management wanted all food outlets to "convert," David decided his "train wasn't traveling on the right track." He refused to homogenize his businesses, closed them all, "took a financial bath" and started over.

A former regular customer at The Meeting Place (the owner of Gordon Wilson Chevrolet, now owned by Larry Miller) suggested he look into the automobile industry. David developed a plan to get a feel for the business by working as a salesperson for three different car dealerships. He was an immediate success, making top sales and achieving the junior management role at Henry Day Ford. He began to see the future of the industry and the opportunities for change, paralleled by a promising future for himself as well.

He saw the need for a sales and management revolution, and after selling his ideas to owner Michael Day, was made senior manager, where he's been for the last eight years.

While some may conclude the brothers have it all, the ardent push to the next level doesn't end. Both Ibarras, ebullient and likable, speak with an altruistic passion about not only their own — and each other's futures — but about the need to improve our collective American future. David donates time to speak to children, youth and professional groups about opportunity and hope.

Ritual courtesy

What the Ibarras have created out of poverty and discouragement seems almost unreal. Did this story begin in Oaxaca? The Zapotec people, as described by historian Juan B. Carriedo in the racial rhetoric of 1846, were "incomparably superior to … other Indians of the rest of the Republic. Intelligent, affable, hard-working." Author Henry Bamford Parkes credited them with being "patient rather than aggressive given to a stoical endurance rather than to conflict. In their intercourse with each other, cheerfulness and good humor were the dominating note, and courtesy became ritual."

The traditions of ancient ancestors, such as "Guelaguetza," and the collectivist practices of Zapotec village members who reached out to neighbors with a need, may well have flowed through the veins of Francisco Ibarra to be renewed in his sons.

Whether it is roots or experience that fuels the Ibarra fire, the brothers are not merely talking the talk — they're walking the walk. Those inspirational messages that we now hear only on infomercials and at motivational seminars, actually meant something to Mickey and David. They seized them as remnants of the American Dream and wove their own individual tapestries. If Mickey has become a politician and David a peddler, they're redefining the words to exclude the cynicism and reclaim their original dignity.

Mickey is often struck by the increasing relevance of the Ibarras' developing life story. He has his own formula for success (an equal dose of persistence and patience) and his own definition of luck ("where preparation meets opportunity." While he fervently believes America to be the greatest country in the world, he tempers his enthusiasm with reality.

Mickey, SLC Mayor "Rocky" Anderson, & David

Re-inventing sales & self

David, who is also president and owner of Executing the Numbers, Inc., a management consulting firm for the automobile industry, talks of re-inventing new concepts of self, workplace and family. But first things first — he wants to take on the American automobile industry. The plan he's been developing for the past eight years will merge his experience in the hospitality business with his years at Henry Day Ford. The new management plan is not only aimed at revolutionizing how cars are sold, but how we buy them. "Executing the Numbers" is all about "helping people get what they want," a win/win situation that "creates the real success in America," so that car salespeople, their co-workers and their clients are treated with the respect of family members.

"I have very high hopes for this consulting company, which I am extremely passionate about," David says. "It gives me the opportunity to do the things I love to do — help people achieve the best that they can be." Yes, okay, it sounds like the U.S. Army recruiting commercial, but in David's mouth it doesn't sound phony.

It's spooky. You may feel you want to work for him. You may decide you want to buy a car from him. Whatever the reason, David Ibarra's methods have been tested and proven viable on the premises of turnover rate among all Salt Lake dealerships, and they've never lost a manager to higher pay. "Some have been given the opportunity to leave for more money," he says, "but they've chose to stay and be a part of our family."

David is a sentimental guy. His office walls are covered with photographs of his family and friends, old menus from his restaurants, plaques and awards. He's a self-proclaimed workaholic; his company is his hobby. His job is his passion. It's the "goose bumps you get in your scalp" that David chases, not the money, he says. "Every time you have an experience like that, you truly feel alive."

Family — wife Merilee, sons Cassidy and Nicholas, and brother Mickey — is the only thing that can take him away.

Mickey Ibarra on C-SPAN

Realism & redemption

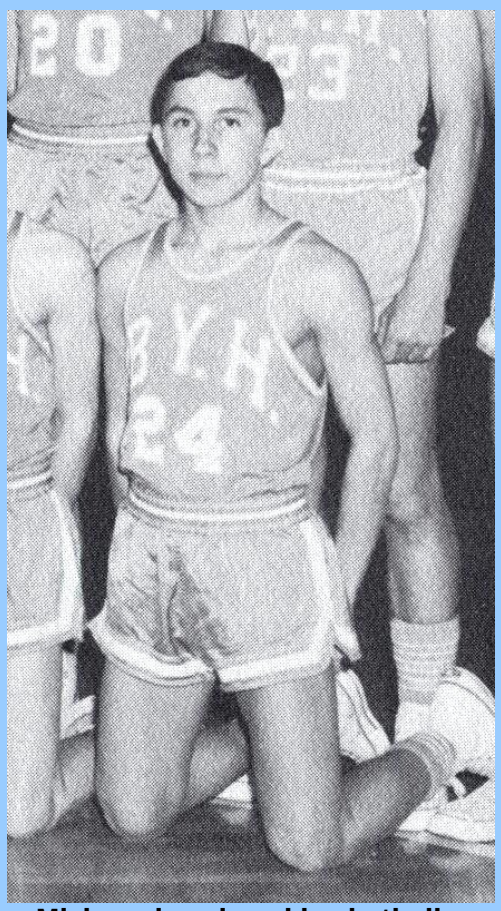
It's too early to tell what Mickey, self-described as a fierce Clinton loyalist, will bring to the White House. His job is to act as a liaison between the President and 280,000 locally-elected officials of the nation, selling Clinton's priority policies while listening to those officials and ensuring they get heard. Two top goals of Clinton's second term — improving education and striving for racial harmony — seem within striking distance with Mickey Ibarra on his team. He is proud to represent the Latino community, working with the first administration to have two presidential assistants of Hispanic background — Maria Echaveste is the second.

Mickey is realist enough to note that although the national economy is presently unusually solid, Hispanics remain the only minority not appreciably affected by the prosperity. He says Hispanic values and traditions of hard work may be being misapplied; the high school dropout rate among Hispanic teens is 50 percent. Mickey Ibarra hopes he has a national power base long enough to address some of those problems.

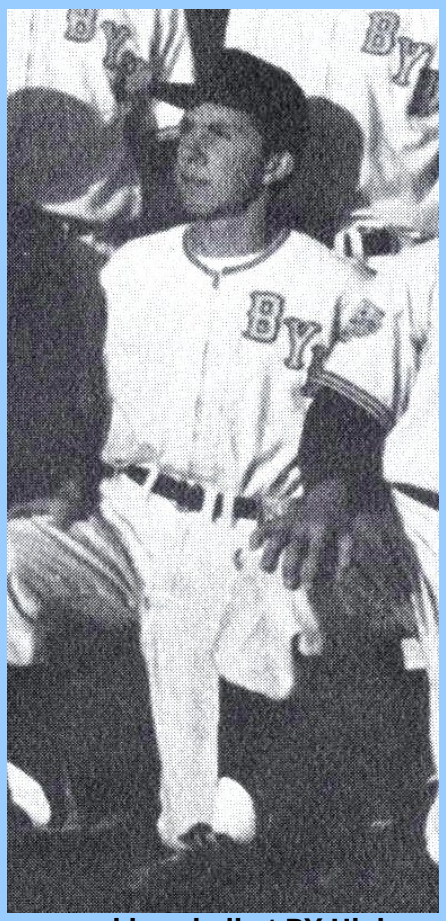
David's and Mickey's foster parents, Ila and Cecil Smith, are now dead. The brothers often visit their graves. Their birth mother, Bonnie Bird Siciliano, is still alive and they have maintained contact with her. Their wish for her since their teens is that she may find some measure of redemptive peace.

"I have no chains on me from what I went through in my youth. I look at [my life] with a great deal of thankfulness that god blessed me with the lessons I was given," David says. "I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for children who are trying to figure out where they belong, or adults who are trying to figure out where they belong in a career progression. The only person I worry about … is my mother. She lives, I believe — for whatever reason — without the comfort of fully knowing her two sons love her as much as they do."

***The Event*, Vol. 17, No. 5**
July 31, 1997



Mickey also played basketball...



...and baseball at BY High.

BYH Biographies

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