

# 10 QUESTIONS

for

Richard Negrin

MANAGING DIRECTOR AND DEPUTY MAYOR FOR ADMINISTRATION AND COORDINATION

## INTERVIEW BY JEFF LYONS

**R**ichard Negrin, Philadelphia managing director and deputy mayor for administration and coordination, has been in his current role with the city since early June. He is the former executive director of the Board of Revision of Taxes and has worked as vice president and associate general counsel at a large corporation, as an associate at a major law firm and as an assistant district attorney. And he came very close to having a career in professional football after an All-American career and winning a national championship in his senior season at Wagner College in New York. He's also been touched by nearly unimaginable family tragedy twice in his life.

**JEFF LYONS:** Is there such a thing as a typical day for the city managing director?

**RICHARD NEGRIN:** There really is no such thing as a typical day. There are really four components to my job. There's the operational responsibility, which is more of a traditional managing director's role. There's the policy piece, which is working closely with the mayor and establishing strategic goals. And that's a little different from the traditional managing director's role, a little broader. There's the coordination piece, which is, in my role as deputy mayor of administration and coordination, working with the other deputy mayors around large initiatives that touch multiple agencies. For example, performance management, which is a priority for me. The property issues that began at the BRT and really cut across so much of what's going on in the city, whether it's the census, developing an address management system, getting accurate property data for the BRT to do their job well. The Office of Property Assessment, I should call, it because the BRT is dead. Identifying, disposing of and

developing a plan around vacant land. It's really all connected. And that's a good example one of the cross-departmental agency roles that I play. The fourth involves things like the duck boat disaster on your third day here.

I never had a job where I had to read the paper as soon as I woke up because I know there will be one or two items that will take at least some portion of my day, every single day. And that

happens in this role. And that's the dynamic, interesting, challenging part.

My day never ends, really. We have a mayor who doesn't sleep. In that way, my legal training has been critical. You learn a lesson as a young lawyer that when you deal with clients you have to be there for them and you have to be there whenever they need you. So you're on your BlackBerry or you take that call regardless of when it is, especially if it's a crisis situation. This job is exactly that. We e-mail all the time and we talk all the time. The day just doesn't end. But that's OK. You feel like you're making a difference every day and I think I do. I feel like I have the best job in the world.

You get an opportunity to make a difference in a way that is rare. You apply your skills in a way that adds value around a great common cause, which is making the city a better place for the people of Philadelphia. I get to do that every single day. One of the things I did early on was to bring all the former managing directors together. I hope to do that quarterly, almost like a think tank. We had a great breakfast – Laurie Jones, Pedro Ramos, former Mayor Wilson Goode,



Phil Goldsmith, Joe Marks, all the great ones from the past. Former Mayor Goode said to me that this was the best job he ever had. And that was really telling. He felt that as managing director, he could get more done on a daily basis than as mayor or in any other role. I need to embrace that and have that kind of perspective and try to be as effective as some of those folks have been over the years.

### **When did your family come to the United States?**

My parents came here in 1961 for one and 1962 for the other. I was born in Newark, N.J. in 1966. I grew up in Elizabeth, N.J., down by the port. It was a tough urban minority neighborhood, predominantly Latino and African American. We moved to Edison, N.J. and I lived in Edison until I went to college.

### **Your legal career started in the District Attorney's Office, then you went over to Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP and then you were vice president and associate general counsel at ARAMARK. Even though you're not practicing law right now, you're still relying on your legal background.**

There's critical thinking that happens every day and understanding the legal system and legal processes. One of the departments I oversee is procurement. The legal issues involved are constant. My experience at ARAMARK has been critical to help understand that because we were a city contractor on the other side. And that's been

really valuable. My experience at the Board of Revision of Taxes is a great example. The fact that I had a real, profound understanding of the constitutional requirements and the uniformity clause was a huge help. I researched the uniformity clause of the Pennsylvania constitution, printed it out and put it on my wall and looked at it every day while I was at the BRT. Understanding what our legal requirements are and being able to be conversant with your attorneys help us to be more efficient. Lawyers are problem solvers. I use that – the quick analysis of facts, the logical approach, the incremental, thoughtful approach – to try to implement new initiatives to come to a solution. That's one of the things you do as an attorney on a daily basis if you're adding value for your clients. You really help them solve their problems. And I'm doing that every day.

### **You're one of the highest-ranking Hispanics in the city. Do you see yourself as a role model or a mentor?**

I do. When you look where I came from, and I say this really humbly, and where I grew up and where my parents came from, fleeing communism in Cuba and dreaming of the American dream, I see a responsibility to both do my best and help others and help communicate that. I trumpet the emphasis on education, hard work and responsibility. When I was a DA, every chance I had, I'd go out to speak to kids in schools. And I'd often ask them how many of them had been touched by violence in their immediate family and unfortunately, often half of them would raise their hands. I can

say credibly I had violence touch my life at an early age, losing my father, violently. He was murdered in front of me. I was able to overcome growing up around poverty, growing up around violence. If you have faith, if you have family and a dedication to education, there are ways to get through. I don't think those things are unique and special about me. That's about a support system that your community really shares with you. It's not about something special in me. I see myself in those kids when I go out and meet with them. Those kids have the potential to do great things.

### **What were the circumstances surrounding your father's death?**

My father was a community leader in North Jersey in the Cuban community. He was working hard for two things – fighting for the release of political prisoners in Cuba and trying to reunite families who were cut off from one another because of Castro's communist regime. My father was part of a small group of academics, priests and community leaders that went to Cuba to negotiate for the release of political prisoners. They were called the Committee of



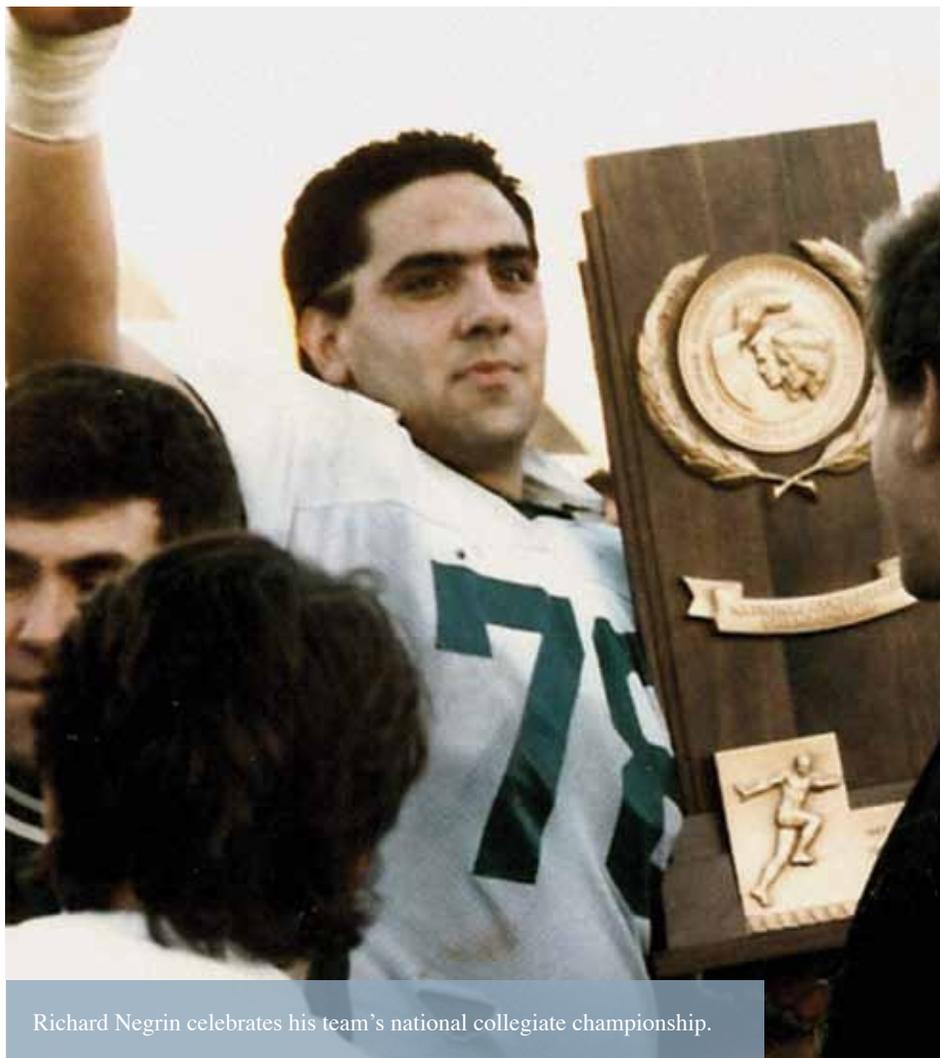
75. As a result of what they did, the Castro government agreed to release 3,000 political prisoners, many of which were veterans of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. They had been in Cuban prisons for 12 to 15 years. As a result of that incredibly important work, my father was targeted by an extreme right-wing Cuban terrorist group called Omega 7, led by a terrible man, a terrorist named Eduardo Arocena. He had targeted my father and others for death.

They're responsible for 50-some odd bombings and four or five assassinations and my father was one of those people. It was a Sunday morning. We were walking down the street getting into a car. I was 13 and he told me to get into the back seat. I was on the sidewalk side of a very narrow street in Union City, N.J. I got into the car and I heard what I thought were fireworks and I look up and there's a blur of a speeding car going past and there's metal and shrapnel everywhere. One of the pieces actually hit me in the hip after it had gone through the car. I had a bruise on my hip but it didn't pierce the skin. I walked around the car, perplexed, and there was my dad, dying. He died in my arms.

### How did you get through that?

I had a loving mother and a stepfather and a family that embraced me and had a strong belief that my faith could take me through that challenge. But to be frank, football really helped me. I joke all the time that family, faith and football, the Fs, got me through. Throwing myself into a sport that allowed you to get out your aggression and have an identity as a young man and be a part of something bigger than yourself was really where I became focused. When you go through something like that at that critical age, it's easy to lose focus and not go in the right direction. My focus on academics really didn't come until I got to college. I did well in high school, but I wasn't one of the A students. I was the kid whose teachers would tell the parents "he's one of the brightest kids in the class, but he doesn't apply himself." That wasn't where my passion was. I needed direction with all these things swirling around and that took time. I think the only reason I went to school sometimes was so I could play football.

And then something happened to me in college that was different. I got far enough away from the incident to really start healing in terms of my emotional well being. My freshman year in college, I testified in federal



Richard Negrin celebrates his team's national collegiate championship.

court against the leader of that terrorist group. It took five years for them to bring that group to justice. And that was really my first exposure to the law. It was cathartic for me to walk into the courtroom, look the man in the face who ordered the murder of my father and testify in federal court. Five years after it happened, I lost faith in any real sense of justice. I got a knock on the door from the FBI saying they caught them and were proceeding to trial and wanted my participation and my assistance. That was my first exposure to lawyers. It's a story where the most tragic thing that happened in my life was probably responsible for who I am and where I am.

### Did you have an interest in a legal career before the trial?

In the neighborhood I grew up in, growing up to be a lawyer wasn't exactly high on the list. I think the first lawyer I met was the U.S. Attorney who was prosecuting the man who killed my father. I think that's why I became a district attorney. I went to law school to be

a prosecutor, not to be a lawyer.

### Did you receive a scholarship to play college football at Wagner?

I got an athletic grant. They don't give scholarships at small schools. We won a national championship in my senior year, which was a great achievement for the school and the team I was on. But I got an athletic grant, and I was a resident assistant, so I went to school very reasonably. I paid for my books and probably food, but that was it. I was an offensive tackle and a Little All American. That's what they called the small college kids.

A few NFL teams started expressing their interest in me my junior year. By my senior year (1988), I was fortunate enough to make the Kodak All-American team, and I worked out for about six different teams. The Cleveland Browns were the first to call. They had the best opportunity for me. Most teams bring in 18 to 20 offensive linemen for training camp. Sometimes they keep, eight sometimes nine, so you're really trying to get



I would have loved to have spent a year or two playing, but as I sit here today, 44 years old without any major injuries, I feel really good about the opportunities I had.

yourself up among that top eight or nine. I made it through training camp, and I thought I made the team. We broke camp, things were good and I played in the preseason and practiced. And then, a running back got hurt, so they had to pick up an extra body, and whoever is on the bubble has to go. They had to pick up two people at other positions, and they moved two people, and I was one of them. I worked out and stayed in shape, and kept in touch with them throughout the season in the event something happened. But no offensive lineman had a serious injury that year. I won't say I wasn't rooting for that, which is a terrible thing to say. But they had a great year and a healthy year.

As soon as the season was over, activity started to begin with my agent with teams who wanted me to come in. I signed with the New York Jets right after the winter meetings. I was with the Jets through the preseason heading into training camp. At this point, I had already decided I was going to go to law school. I made that decision in college. The NFL was really a fun diversion from that. But the goal was really to go to law school at that point.

Right before training camp with the Jets, a team I would have had a really good chance to make, because the team was in real trouble. Cleveland was fantastic. The caliber of player was very different in Cleveland that it was in New York. I was very optimistic about my chances in New York. And then, the NFL did something really interesting. Teams used to bring 120 guys into training camp. They created the World League that year and created an 80-man roster limit. So every team in the NFL had to release the last 40 free agents that they signed to flood the market to create the World League. There were teams that wanted me to play arena football and teams that wanted me to play in Europe. I told myself I was going to give pro football two years. I didn't want to be one of the guys who didn't have any other options and kept trying and trying year after year. I wanted to get my legal career started. I might have put law school off for the NFL, but I wouldn't do that for the World League. The average career in the NFL is something

around four years. I would have loved to have spent a year or two playing, but as I sit here today, 44 years old without any major injuries, I feel really good about the opportunities I had.

I wasn't supposed to be there. I went to a small college where I was undersized. When I got into college, I was 6-4 and 215 pounds. I went into the weight room and did things the right way. I didn't believe in steroids and that whole culture. When I was in the NFL I was up around 300 pounds, which for the late 1980s, was pretty good. It was a remarkable achievement and I was proud of what I accomplished. Fewer than 1 percent of all college football players get to play in the NFL. I had the chance to do that. I got a phone call one day and literally two days later I'm in the huddle with Bernie Kosar in minicamp. That was surreal. I was happy to take that experience and move on to the next phase of my life.

**You're involved with some charity work that came about as a result of some personal tragedy with your family.**

My wife and I co-founded the Pennsylvania chapter of Families of Spinal Muscular Atrophy. They didn't have a Pennsylvania chapter when our daughter Abigail was diagnosed at six months old. It's a terrible, degenerative muscular disease. She was cognitively unaffected and was really bright, but it impairs your muscular ability and your ability to sit up or crawl or walk. She had difficulty eating. She had difficulty with colds. Every cold would be life threatening because of her mucus and her ability to manage mucus. The disease is progressive, especially when it's type one. There are various types of the disease. When you're diagnosed that young and it's that severe, more than 80 percent of children are dead by the age of two. My wife (Karen McRory-Negrin), who is just a real hero, is a former rape and child-abuse prosecutor. We met in the DA's office. She left her job and stayed home and single-handedly managed Abigail's care. Abigail made it past the age of five. At the time, she was the oldest living

child with SMA Type 1 who had been treated at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. And a lot of that is because of my wife, the caring and nursing that she did. We really turned Abigail's room in our house into a hospital room. We had oxygen and various machines that were required for her treatments. They call it a coughalator that helps manage mucus. She would require treatments every few hours. We all became good at doing those treatments. I used to joke that I was a certified respiratory therapist as a result. We'd do deep suction on her on a regular basis to help manage that. Unfortunately, as a result of the disease, she had a mucus plug that couldn't be cleared. A nurse was with her and we lost her. She was a little over five years old.

We do various events throughout the year and the chapter has really grown. It's gone from not being there to 39 or so families across the state who are affected and involved. Our fundraising walk has gone from a few people to 700 people at this year's walk on Kelly Drive. We raised \$90,000 in one day with corporate sponsors. My wife, over the last seven years, has raised more than half a million dollars for research as a result of the chapter and what we do.

**Do you have any plans to run for elected office or are you happy with what you're doing?**

I'm incredibly happy doing what I'm doing. The big aspirations that I have are around working with a mayor that I deeply respect and who I think has the real well being of Philadelphians at heart every single day. Part of the reason I'm here and part of the reason he chose me was to bring a performance culture around doing things better and more efficiently with integrity. I'm committed to that goal and that's where I want to be for the near future and hopefully as long as possible. Every day is full of challenges and opportunities and I want to win the day, every day. ■

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