

Josef Rademacher

12th Grade

Madison West High School

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Madison, WI 53726

Parents: John Rademacher and Michele Ritt, MTI members

Grandfather: Robert Ritt, UAW member

Great Grandfather: LeVerne Tarkett, UAW member

Great Grandfather: Johannes Rademacher, Amalgamated Meat Cutters
member Great Great Grandfather: Frank J. Van Duelman, Machinist Local 1238
member

“Thank you, young man,” the woman said as I handed her a paper cup full of hot soup and a Ziplock bag of toiletries. Her worn face gave me a smile and a wink. I felt embarrassed; I was speechless and smiled back sheepishly. Others followed her in line along the cold November sidewalk. They were preparing to settle for the night in the entrance of the city-county building. I was ten, volunteering for Stone Soup, a group co-founded by my family in 2011. I didn’t yet realize that I was already on a journey that started nine months earlier, just around the corner at the State Capitol, amid a sea of protesters.

In February, 2011, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker introduced Act 10, which eliminated the collective bargaining rights of most public employees. Protesters surrounded the Capitol. I was just a third grader, more interested in superheroes than politics, but my parents, both public school teachers and proud union members, hauled the family downtown to “make our voices heard.” Never before had I seen such a massive demonstration, in which so many people felt silenced. Chants of “Recall Walker!” and strains of “Solidarity Forever” filled the air. Our daily trips to the Capitol would not only challenge my naive beliefs about the world, but also start me on the path of speaking up about those who are being silenced.

My parents are both active members of Madison Teachers, Inc, a strong teachers union, and my grandfather was a member of the United Auto Workers. I grew up hearing stories of the many times Grandpa and his co workers went on strike when he worked at the John Deere Plant in Dubuque. With family tradition at its heart,

protesting became our daily family routine. We were joined by thousands of outraged public union workers and their allies, passionately speaking up against injustice. These union members became the role models I look up to when I observe unfairness around me.

The protests also impacted the routines of Madison's homeless population, many of whom spent their days in the warm capitol building. Seeing them opened my eyes to another form of injustice and another group without a voice. They prompted the creation of Stone Soup. My family traversed downtown Madison with volunteers, offering warm meals and survival supplies to unsheltered individuals. It was a simple gesture, but I was moved by how much it meant to every person I handed a bowl of soup.

While I was useful preparing and delivering meals, I felt awkward speaking out. Then in seventh grade, I decided it was time to take a leap out of my comfort zone, and joined the high school speech team. Naturally, I wrote a speech of protest, protesting the most important issue to me at the time: Disney's acquisition of Star Wars. I enjoyed making people laugh, but I felt like I could be doing more.

When I was in ninth grade, Stone Soup transitioned to other agencies serving the homeless, but I wanted to continue supporting these individuals. Inspired by speakers at the 2011 protests, I wrote a nationally qualifying speech about one of my most striking memories from Stone Soup: the hygiene inequality that hampers every aspect of a homeless person's life, from job security to personal relationships. Many audience members were shocked, but thankful, to learn about the depth of this often ignored

subject. To prepare for national speech competitions, I connected with agencies serving the homeless in Omaha and Dallas. Performing in national tournaments gave me a larger platform to share my ideas, which will only expand in college as I compete with higher profile teams and work directly with campus and community organizations.

I never believed I had a role to play in helping others until I witnessed the empathy and strength of others. The words and actions of the public union workers fighting for their rights and my family serving the homeless taught me that my voice can help ensure that others don't lose theirs. Speaking truth to power is my responsibility as I continue on this journey that started years ago. I found the confidence to speak up for others, and I know my third grade self would be proud knowing that he could look up to me as a role model. Solidarity!