

# A Visionary, ‘Renaissance Man’

SHARON BARNES

I met John Tanton in the early 1970s when we were both involved with Zero Population Growth (ZPG). I was impressed then with his interest in a broad range of environmental and conservationist organizations. He and his wife Mary Lou had formed a chapter of the Nature Conservancy in their area of Michigan, had also formed a chapter of Planned Parenthood, and were involved with the Sierra Club, and many other organizations committed to protecting the environment.

Even then he seemed the Renaissance Man. His interests were varied, extensive, and profound. Of special consideration were conservation and environmental concerns. When various topics came up, such as energy, he was schooled in every aspect of the topic. He was an avid reader with a photographic memory.

John was a strategic thinker. As immigration became a larger percentage of U.S. population growth, he tried to get ZPG to address the issue. Early on he knew from polls and surveys that the average person was concerned about immigration, both legal and illegal. But, the elites in media, academia, and corporate America supported large-scale immigration for their own selfish reasons and name called anyone who questioned that approach. And no other environmental organization was willing to take on the issue at that time. One of our board members noted that we would likely be called racists. John said, we have been called murderers for supporting family planning. The woman replied, “A murderer is one thing, but a racist is quite another.” Another member said it would be a very difficult issue for many people because illegal immigrants had cleaned our houses and helped raise our kids, and it would be hard to argue for an end to that. So, ZPG was not going to talk about immigration.

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*Sharon Barnes, born and raised in Colorado, graduated from Lewis and Clark College in 1966, Oregon State in 1968, and Columbia University in 1987 with an MBA in Finance. After a decade of working with non-profits including Zero Population Growth (ZPG), Planned Parenthood Federation, the ASPCA, and other groups in New York City, she joined the investment side of Prudential Insurance Co. in 1981.*

Soon John began working to develop an organization that would focus on immigration as a population issue. He said we would need to publicize research that was being done on all impacts of immigration. He said we needed a legal group to bring suits on immigration-related issues. We needed a group focusing on the critical need for a common language. He thought we should concentrate on the numbers of immigrants. He was adamant about financial security of the various groups who would need to be around for the long haul. He saw to it that the groups saved a piece of every contribution for future needs. He saw issues that needed attention and generally found like-minded people to work on a given piece of the immigration puzzle. He strongly believed that population was the critical factor in environmental protection, and since immigration was driving U.S. population growth, it was an issue that had to be addressed. He was a slow and steady kind of person...constantly working on his issues and trying to bring the concerns of the average person to the forefront.

In the early 1970s he gave all of us a copy of Saul Alinsky’s book, *Rules for Radicals*, and said we needed to read it and understand that it included the strategies that would be used against us. He couldn’t have been more correct.

John leaves a huge legacy. Probably more than any other individual he has brought the immigration concerns of the average person to the forefront, and now that topic is front-page news almost every day. If he had a fault, I would say it was that he was too trusting. He believed that the causes he championed were so common sense and critical that anyone who joined the battle to save the country would be trustworthy and would work fully toward that goal. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body and always saw the best in people, even after they betrayed him. We will miss John Tanton and his amazing visionary mind. Fortunately, there is still Mary Lou, his wife, a leader in her own right, and their children. There are also the many people who work with and for the organizations he created, and they will continue to carry on the necessary work.

I will always remember and honor John as the founder and leader of the modern immigration reform movement. I feel fortunate to have known him and worked with him. ■