From days at summer camp to broken VW van clutch: son of Community House director shares memories

(West Haven, CT 6-20-16) Part 1 – Former city resident Hank Silverberg, now 61, recalls West Haven Community House memories, where his father, Sid Silverberg, was executive director of the agency from 1957 to 1970.

Children of organizational executives often become involved in the very same organization. It was no different for the Silverberg family of West Haven, when Sid Silverberg was the executive director of The West Haven Community House from 1957 to 1970.

Sid’s son, Hank, now 61, recalls “dozens of stories” involving family members with the Community House, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary in 2016 including a free “Party on the Green” from noon to 4 p.m. on Saturday, June 18, and open to everyone.

“I wrote about most of them in my book ‘If the Log Rolls Over’ published back in 2005,” Hank recalled by email correspondence last week.

“Dad ran the agency for more than 15 years. He took over when I was 3 and retired the year I went off to college at 18,” he noted. “My Mom worked there briefly for a time, too.”

For Voice readers, Hank offered to describe “a few things that happened during Dad’s tenure.

“The building itself [still at 227 Elm Street today] went from an old house – to the new wing and then adding on to the rebuilt barn in the back yard.

“They had a contest among people who frequented the agency about a slogan, and someone came up with the ‘3 to 93’ logo.”

As if to prove the truth in the slogan, Hank added, “In fact, I started nursery school at the Community House at age 3, went to the summer camp from age six to 13 and began working there at age 14, first as a counselor in training, and then moved up to Junior Counselor and then Counselor as I got older.
“I worked as a counselor every summer right through Graduate School - even after Dad retired.”

Hank recalled, “When I was in high school during the winter, the agency showed movies in the auditorium on Saturday mornings for 25 cents. Dad rented them from somewhere. They sold popcorn and I ran the projector.

“There was Road Runner cartoons, Three Stooges, stuff like that – and inexpensive to rent. The place was always packed [in part] because lots of those kids could not afford the movies at the Rivoli Theatre downtown.

“Being a counselor at the summer camp, which didn’t pay much, was more than a job, however. It was fun,” Hank noted. “We learned a lot about working with kids, and made some lifelong friends.

“My family wrote the camp song to the tune of Yankee Doodle. I remember sitting around the kitchen table coming up with several versus. The name Camp-to-Come-To was supposed to imitate an Indian name – not politically incorrect in those days – like Camp Tecumseh or Camp Minnie-Ha-Ha.

“Many a social work student came through the agency in those days as a counselor, division head or camp director. Dad did the summer camp director job himself at the beginning but then gave the job to other people as the agency grew.

“And my younger brother, Mitch, also went to the camp as a child and worked as a counselor from 1970 to 1979. Mitch started out as a counselor in training and worked his way up to program director. It was working at Camp-to-Come-To that set him on his path as an educator and coach for the past 36 years.

“One quick story: I mentioned the ‘new wing’ on the main building, which included the auditorium. My father, my older brother Rick and I spent Nov. 23, 1963, the day after the Kennedy assassination, putting tile on the floor of the basement.

“Dad wanted us away from the tragedy as much as possible and there was work to be done. My brother and Dad did all the work. I snuck away into one of the side rooms where there was a TV and watched the news coverage of the assassination.

“It was my 9th birthday. My party was cancelled and that was the day I got the ‘news bug’ and I have been a journalist for 40 years.

“Dad and Rick did the tile laying because the agency was always short on funds. Free labor helped, and it brings me to one of my favorite stories.

“When I was 13 – too old for camp and too young to be a counselor – Dad came up with ‘Teen Travelcade’ for kids my age. He put one of his social work students in charge and turned over the agency's VW bus to us to travel in.
“Two days a week we did community projects around town. I remember picking up garbage from the beach around Jimmies Restaurant one time. Dad was active in the ‘Save our Shore’ group trying to restore the beach in those days.

“There were six kids in the group with me – just enough to fill the VW van. I had gone to camp with most of them for years, as many West Haven kids spent part of every summer at the Community House summer camp.

“The other three days a week we traveled to state parks or attractions and we had a two night camp out at the end of the summer. I saw my first Major League baseball game with that group at THAT Stadium in the Bronx. I am a lifelong Red Sox fan and do not use the ‘Y’ word.

“Despite it being the Bronx team and not my Sox, it was a fun day. The visiting team was the Minnesota Twins.

“But that whole summer we keep a secret from my Dad about the van. The agency did not have money to fix things like a broken van and we knew it. The clutch malfunctioned a lot.

“So to start the van the counselor would get in the driver’s seat. Four of us would get behind the van while the other two held the doors open. We would then push the van from the back until the counselor popped the clutch and the motor started.

“Then we’d jump in and off we’d go.”

“Dad never knew about it. Of course there were liability issues, but who thought about things like that – because we knew if the van went down, so did our summer.”