

Ratzenberger happy to be made in Bridgeport

Sunlight shimmered on the water of Black Rock Harbor and flashed off the brass fittings and hardware on the sailboats moored outside the windows of the Black Rock Yacht Club.

Crisp white linens covered the tables in the waterfront dining room and the well-scrubbed staff moved about, their yacht club burgee emblazoned on their shirts.

A well-stocked lunch buffet and bar were set up on the sun-splashed deck for the benefit of some 100 developers brought to this lovely location to hear from Mayor John M. Fabrizi about the attributes of



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and opportunities in Bridgeport.

Inside the elegant clubhouse, under the gaze of the portraits of past commodores, Black Rock boy John Ratzenberger stepped to the podium in front of a group of developers.

You could see the line coming.

"I can't tell you how gratifying it is," he said, "to be invited to a place I used to get thrown out of."

He gestured to the back of the room where one Jimmy Shannon, director of pupil services for the Bridgeport public school system was

standing.

"Yeah, Jimmy Shannon and I used to sneak through the fence and swim in the pool 'til we got thrown out," he said.

"When we're done here," he added, "if you want to see where the hole in the fence is, yeah, we'll show ya."

Ratzenberger's jaunts around the country on his TV show "John Ratzenberger's Made in America" have just added new numbers to the fans he first won for his character on "Cheers," Cliff Clavin, the know-it-all mailman. Of course some of his fans go back to the days when he was just another kid — although a very, very funny kid — growing up in Bridgeport.

He still bleeds Bridgeport. He's a product not only of St. Ann's grammar school, Bassick High School and Sacred Heart University, but of a work ethic that permeated both his family and the city when he was growing up. Some of that, combined with his experiences on the road, show up in his new book "We've Got it Made in America: A Common Man's Salute to an Uncommon Country," written with Joel Engel and due in bookstores next month.

Ratzenberger can certainly play the fool, but he is a thoughtful, literate man with a strong message about his belief in the American working man.

The day before the Black Rock event, he'd brought some heavy financial hitters to

Bridgeport from Beverly Hills to meet Fabrizi and local developers.

A principal in the investment group is former NBA great Earvin 'Magic' Johnson, he of the no-look pass. Another is a fellow named Bob Turner, whose presentation to the group of developers in the mayor's conference room the other day was refreshing when one considers the parade of assorted charlatans, sidewinders, carpetbaggers, grifters and patent medicine salesmen over the decades.

Their bombast is memorialized in the Hall of Fame of Stunning Architects' Renderings tucked away on the second floor of Bridgeport City Hall. Turner's message was, essentially, "We have lots of money. We don't need Bridgeport. We're here because we think there's opportunity. We want partners who also have to absorb the risk. And we came on the word of John Ratzenberger."

A few weeks ago, Shannon introduced Ratzenberger and Fabrizi. The actor and the mayor hit it off and Ratzenberger, always a believer in Bridgeport, walked away a believer in Fabrizi.

"I'm not going to have people fly 3,000 miles and not be confident about who they're dealing with," he said.

"And I will tell you they, and I, are impressed with Fabrizi as a marketer. You know, anybody

can run meetings and sign checks."

Did the cocaine thing dampen anyone's interest? He shook his head. "No, we all make mistakes."

Ratzenberger's friendship with Shannon dates back to grammar school days at St. Ann's school in Black Rock. And when the two of them are together — each 59 years old now — there is a certain amount of regression to grammar school days — and ways.

The other night, over dinner at Ralph and Rich's in downtown Bridgeport, the stories started. If Ratzenberger is a performer who has made millions laugh, Shannon is the guy whose stories and delivery can put Ratzenberger in convulsion. I have not cried in a restaurant since, well, I don't think I've ever cried in a restaurant. The three of us worked at the Fairchild Wheeler golf course as teenagers in the mid-Sixties. When Shannon told the story about breakfast with a co-worker named Wendell at the golf course in 1965, I laughed 'til I cried. Now granted, it was through tears, but I think I saw Ratzenberger rolling on the floor.

Sorry, we vowed that what happens at Ralph and Rich's stays at Ralph and Rich's. *Michael J. Daly is managing editor of the Connecticut Post. You can reach him at 330-6394 or by e-mail at mdaly@ctpost.com.*