



## Confessions of a

# Red Vest

Celebrated garment dishes on owner Lee Sherman Dreyfus

Lee Sherman Dreyfus and I first became acquainted in the late-1960s, after he was named president of Wisconsin State University-Stevens Point (later, chancellor of the reorganized and renamed University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point). I remember it like it was yesterday. There I was, on a store display rack, and along comes this dapper mustachioed gent, wearing what appeared to be my doppelganger. I thought surely he would pass me

by—who feels the need for more than one red vest?—and I'd be left hanging (yeah, I said it), disregarded like Charlie-in-the-Box on the Island of Misfit Toys. But much to my surprise and delight, he picked me!

The stories people have told about me and my textile brethren range from the curious to downright, pardon my language, fabrications. My favorite, and the one I am most inclined to believe, involves an icon of television costuming. Before coming to the university, Lee had

served as general manager of WHA-TV, Wisconsin's public broadcasting station. As such, he appears to have been privy to information on the programming of other regional stations at the time—including the popular *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* out of Pittsburgh. Proud man that he was, Lee would never admit this, but it's highly probable that he cribbed the idea for wearing me and my ilk from Rogers and his delightful zippered sweaters. By the way, Rogers' mom knitted those for him. Did you know that?

Not all the tales surrounding our number are so reasonable. One such bit of fluff and nonsense had Lee deciding to wear a red vest after someone, who supposedly was upset with his pro-military stance during a time of anti-war protests on campus, had taken a potshot at him with a bow and arrow late one evening. Poppycock! True, Lee had clashed with members of the student body over the installment of an ROTC unit on campus during the conflict in Vietnam. But it was an ideological difference that never came to physical violence. I doubt he ever actually dodged an arrow in the dark of night. Besides, think about it: Why would someone who allegedly had been threatened with being pierced through and through ever willingly drape a bright red bullseye around themselves? It defies logic.

The fact of the matter is that in Lee's life, I stood for something much more innocuous but every bit as potent—recognition. Sure, he wanted to stand out on campus so that students with questions and concerns could readily identify him. But I was also part of a shrewd PR maneuver. Lee and I gave many a high school commencement address in the hopes of resonating positively with young men and women on the threshold of choosing what university they would attend. As Lee said in a 1972 short film promoting the university:

“ There is no question that I want people, when they spot me anywhere in the state—and with the aid of a red vest, of which I have fourteen and never go without it—I want them immediately to say, 'There goes the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.' ”

Man, I'll tell you, nothing beat the feeling of having all eyes on me as Lee and I traveled across campus and around town. Everybody knew us on sight. And it wasn't just the fame. It was the sheer joy that came with being heavily invested (yep, I went there, too) in so many big-doings on the UWSP campus. I'll give you a “for instance.” I was on-hand—rather, on-chest—when Lee struck a deal with John Joanis of Sentry Insurance to provide fill dirt for construction of the company's headquarters in exchange for scooping out a crater to create a lake on land that would eventually become Schmeackle Reserve. Brilliant! Given the watery nature of that project, I initially feared that I'd be replaced by Lee's snappy white Navy dress-uniform vest (he served during World War II) or, heaven forbid, an orange inflatable number. Thankfully, neither option came to pass. Although the lake was named after Joanis in 1994, I'm rather partial to its original, and I believe rightful, name—Lake Dreyfus.

I also played an integral part in Lee's 1977-78 gubernatorial run. Not many people know this but I was the model for the red-vest insignia displayed so prominently on campaign buttons and good old LSD's hippy-trippy campaign bus, the Red Vest Whistle Stop Special. A fond memory I have from Lee's time as governor involves him signing the first statewide gay rights law, which forbade discrimination against the LGBTQ community with regard to housing, employment and public accommodations. Hey, I was perfectly happy being in the closet, but that didn't mean everybody else had to be kept there as well in order to get a fair shake.

After Lee passed away, we vests wound up going our separate ways. One braggart of the bunch received the honor of being donated to the Wisconsin Historical Society, where he is on

display in the organization's museum up in Madison. Me, I wound up in a Goodwill bin, where I was eventually claimed by the costume department of a regional theatrical company. Perhaps you saw my [career-defining performance](#) in *Les Miz* at Milwaukee's Skylight Music Theatre in 2013. No? Well, never mind.

These days I can be seen on a commemorative tile within the mosaic mural on the side of the College of Natural Resources building, and my profile graces the menus and other signage at The Red Vest restaurant, located in the university center named for my good pal Lee. So both of our legacies are well preserved at UWSP.

All in all, it's been a pretty darned good life, thanks to my favorite owner. I wasn't Lee Sherman Dreyfus' first red vest, and I certainly wasn't his last. But I was proud to be a member of his velveteen and knit brigade.

