

# ENTERTAINMENT+LIFE



Carl Levin during his Detroit City Council days, circa 1970. PROVIDED BY WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

## GETTING TO THE HEART OF CARL LEVIN

Longtime Michigan senator reflects on his life and career in new memoir

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In 1996, when former U.S. Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan was running for re-election, his GOP opponent, Ronna Romney, attacked him for the amount of travel he'd done, something she characterized as "junkets."

At the time, Virginia Sen. John Warner, Levin's good friend and a Republican, was coming to Michigan to campaign for Romney but he assured Levin, a lifelong Democrat, that he would say nothing negative about him. So when reporters asked Warner, who'd traveled with Levin a number of times, what he thought of Romney's accusation, he said: "Are you kidding? Traveling with Levin is like being in a seminar."

Warner then recounted a trip the two senators took through Paris on their way to meet with a French minister. He said Levin was so busy reading his briefing books he didn't even pick up his head to look at the Eiffel Tower.

It's a story Levin shares in his memoir, "Getting to the Heart of the Matter: My 36 Years in the Senate,"

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Carl Levin, a Democrat, was born to a prominent Detroit family in 1934 and went on to become Michigan's longest-serving U.S. senator. RYAN GARZA/DETROIT FREE PRESS

*ON THE BACK PAGE: MICHIGAN HOUSE ENVY*



# Levin

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which spans his childhood in Detroit through his retirement. It focuses heavily on his 44 years of public service, including eight years on Detroit's City Council, four as president, and six terms in Congress, where Levin ultimately chaired the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

The story shows how Levin got along with officials from opposing parties and also exemplifies his dedication.

"He is a true workhorse," says Linda Gustitus, who worked with the senator for 24 years until she retired in 2003 as his chief of staff. "For any hearing we ever did, he was the most hard-working detailed person. If you gave him a notebook of a 100-page document, he would read it."

At 356 pages, the book, like Levin himself, can feel a bit like a seminar, a history lesson on how government works and how it sometimes doesn't. The lifelong Detroiters blends personal stories with insights on myriad events — everything from his early work in private practice to becoming the first general counsel of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, from the aftermath of the 1967 Detroit riots to working with Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and from 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the 2008 financial crisis. He shares his thoughts on the Clinton impeachment and Donald Trump, the lessons he learned from then-Sen. Joe Biden and what Egypt's Anwar Sadat taught him about peace.

"I always wanted to write a memoir if I had the time," says Levin, 86, who lives in Detroit with his wife of 60 years, Barbara, with whom he has three daughters and six grandchildren. "There were important lessons I learned along the way."

Not that Levin jumped into writing after his 2015 retirement. "He resisted at first," says Gustitus, now a senior advisor at the Levin Center at Wayne Law. She met Levin in 1974 as a law student at Wayne State when he was city council president. "I liked what I saw: an honest, down-to-earth, compassionate, smart public official," she writes in the book's foreword. "I thought: We have to do something for his memory."

Gustitus envisioned a book that did for others what Levin did for her: help young people interested in public life find the path to take.

Convinced finally by his family, including big brother Sander, who served Michigan in the U.S. House of Representatives for 36 years, Levin rolled up his sleeves and dug into the roughly two-year memoir project. In it, he reveals for the first time that he has been living since age 83 with a lung cancer diagnosis, though it doesn't appear to have slowed him down too much.

"I had a lot of help," Levin says of the writing process, crediting his wife as a good writer and editor among legions of others. "It's fun to remember things. So there's a real pleasure in doing it, but it takes a lot of time to do it right, to go over it, and re-edit it and re-edit it and re-edit it."

Levin half jokes about the edits. "They told me many times, 'This is it.' And I would call them up a week later and say, 'I left out a name' or 'I made a mistake on a year.' I kept pushing that envelope. I was probably told three or four times: 'That's it.'"

That focus is understandable considering Levin's reputation among his colleagues as very smart and detailed, says Gustitus.

"When they wanted to know what the bill said, they'd turn to Carl," she recalls.

## Detroit City Council training ground

Among the big lessons Levin shared about government during an interview in late February is the way he learned to get things done as president of the Detroit City Council. "I had to bring together nine people with different views for the good of the city. ... If that's your goal, you've got to learn to respect people who have very different political views or very different policy remedies than you. That was an extremely important part of my legislative background when I went to Washington."

He learned other lessons in those years on the council, many involving his battle with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). "Or, as I once told Mike Wallace in a '60 Minutes' interview, 'Hell Upon Detroit,'" he writes in the book.

Levin tells the story of how HUD wasn't maintaining thousands of abandoned houses in the city that the agency had recovered through mortgage foreclosures in the 1970s. "They did severe damage to Detroit's neighborhoods by the way they maintained them without proper boarding up or security," says Levin.

Levin ultimately ordered the homes to be torn down through a city ordinance. HUD hit back, telling Levin and the council it was a crime to demolish a federal building. "They threatened to indict us," Levin recalls. "I said to HUD: 'Go ahead. You think a jury is going to convict me? They are going to convict you.'"

The fight taught Levin that even though government's role is critical, government agencies can also mess up. "They can evade their responsibility," he says. "I also learned that when they show up to give you explanations, you've got to get into the facts. You've got to study and listen. ... You've got to stand up to agencies which aren't doing their job."

Another lesson: When Levin went to Wash-



Sandy Levin, left, with his brother Carl in Detroit in May 1945. PROVIDED BY WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS



Former U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, left, marches with his brother Carl during a Fourth of July parade in Clawson. ROMAIN BLANQUART/DETROIT FREE PRESS

ington to complain to his representatives about HUD, they said: "That's not us; that's HUD. Go see HUD in Chicago." Levin told them he wanted Congress to be responsible. "That's where I really got into the importance of legislative oversight ... to make sure that we just don't pass programs. We make sure they work."

Levin says a capstone of his career was chairing the U.S. Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which has unique subpoena power. Levin earned a reputation for being a tough, intimidating interrogator during oversight hearings. "We took on Goldman Sachs, some really big babies and insurance companies," says Levin, who shares stories of going after tax dodgers, money launderers and Enron.

Although the subcommittee didn't have legislative authority, its hearings provided the facts and raw materials that committees creating legislation relied upon, says Levin. "There was a number of laws which resulted from our oversight hearings, even though we didn't write them." The panel's work helped lay the basis for the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

Levin also shares stories of what he did for the city and the state through his work in the Senate, including getting funding for Detroit's riverfront and the nonprofit Focus: HOPE.

He's proud of his work at winning federal wilderness area designations for parts of the state, despite opposition from people who lived in the areas. His efforts, he says, were learning experiences.

"You've got to listen to people, listen to criticism," he notes, "but then you've got to do what you think is best for your people, even though it might not be popular."

## 'You're as good as anybody'

Though Levin's memoir goes heavy on his professional work, it also includes stories of his early life as the youngest of three children in a loving family in Detroit's Boston Edison neighborhood.

Levin, the son of a respected lawyer and nephew of a federal judge, says public service was in his genes. He was raised with some privilege, but says his mother taught her children

never to put on airs. "She always told us: 'You're as good as anybody, but you're not better than anybody,'" he recalls.

Levin also talks of his close relationship with brother Sander, 89. Levin's first year at Harvard Law School "was the best" because he roomed with Sandy, who was in this third year.

"We took up the great game of squash, which we played together into our eighties," writes Levin. "We usually came back to our dorm room to have lunch together, invariably making Kraft macaroni and cheese with tuna fish, and then went right to the books."

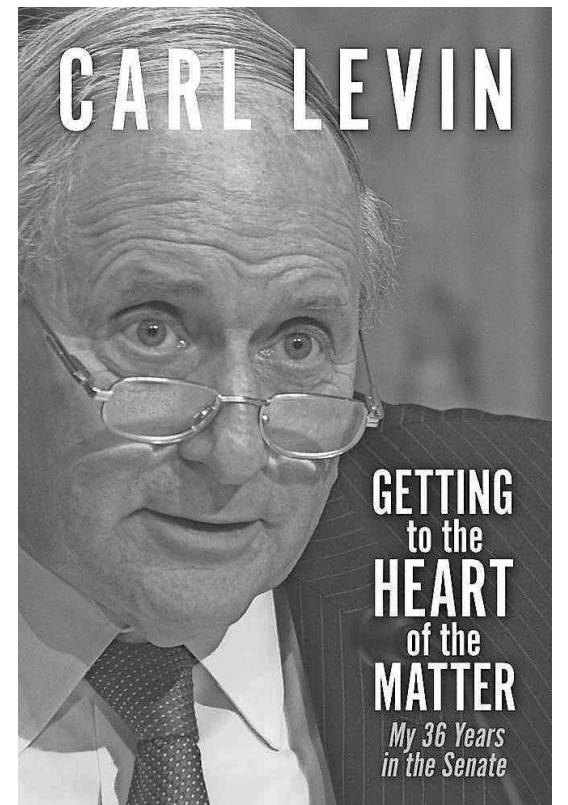
Soon after Harvard, Levin met his wife, Barbara Halpern, on a blind date "that lasted the rest of my life." They've been married 60 years this year and find joy in their grandchildren. "They are so caring," says the former senator. "They take such good care of us."

At the end the book, Levin, who would have been 86 had he finished a seventh term in the Senate, explains why he retired. "I had seen too many colleagues who had stayed too long and observed the decline in their intellectual stamina and their health," he says. He adds that this decision was "somewhat prescient" given that his cancer diagnosis came just a few years after he announced his plans to retire.

Though Levin doesn't comment further on his health challenges, he does offer this in his memoir's final chapter: "Retirement has reinforced an instinct my mother instilled in me — acceptance of whatever the passage of time and Mother Nature have in store for us, as we grow old."

Meanwhile, Levin says he has been keeping busy. He joined the Honigman law firm in Detroit, where he has worked as a co-mediator on the Flint water crisis litigation with former Wayne County Judge Pamela Harwood. Of the two-year process, he says: "It's very complicated. There's literally tens of thousands of plaintiffs and hundreds of lawyers and dozens of lawsuits."

He also has done some teaching at the Wayne State University Law School through the Levin Center in Midtown Detroit, which was established in his honor in 2015 to carry on his legacy of fact-based, bipartisan, in-depth legislative oversight. The center offers academic programs and seminars on the practice,



Carl Levin's new memoir, "Getting to the Heart of the Matter: My 36 Years in the Senate," arrived March 2. WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

## 'Getting to the Heart of the Matter: My 36 Years in the Senate'

By Carl Levin

Wayne State University Press, 392 pages, \$29.99

Levin will speak at 11:30 a.m. March 19 as part of the virtual two-day Michigan in Perspective conference hosted by the Historical Society of Michigan. He'll discuss Michigan and his career with Richard Wiener. The two-day conference costs \$75 for HSM members, \$105 for non-members. For info or to register, call (517) 324-1828 or go to: <https://hsmichigan.org/conferences/local-history-conference/registration/>

says Levin, the center's chair. It already has trained several hundred legislators and staff at both the federal and state level and done some training in Europe.

As for the future of government, Levin is encouraged. He says he loves talking to young people to whom he poses these questions to demonstrate his philosophy:

"Should I do what most people want? They say yes. Should I do what I think is the right thing, even if it's not popular? They say yes."

"The third question: Do you see any inconsistency in your answers? And everybody laughs," says Levin. "They get it. I think it's a really important question about government and public service."

Now as Levin looks ahead to promoting the book by Zoom, he's also reflecting on his life and says he feels blessed. "We've been blessed with parents who cared so much and to be part of family who cares. And my constituency has been so very supportive of me. ... They don't have to agree with me on something, but they'll say something positive like, 'We trust you.' That's so rewarding to hear."