

Rich Hayes - Man of Steel

Former Entertainment Committee Chairman Rich Hayes, is probably not the first face you picture when you think of a man of steel. After all, he doesn't run around wearing blue tights and a red cape, at least not when folks are watching.

Regrettably, he doesn't have X-ray vision, nor is he faster than a speeding bullet (unless you include the buffet line), but he is definitely a man of steel.

Rich was a 95-pound lightweight when he finished his structural ironworker apprenticeship and was hired by the Harris Structural Steel Company to work on the 692-foot towers of New York's Verrazano-Narrows bridge.

It was the longest suspension bridge in the world at the time and remains the longest in America to this day.

The bridge was named for Giovanni Verrazano, the first European explorer to sail into New York Harbor. It was completed in 1964, just in time for the World's Fair, as a vital link between Brooklyn and Staten Island.

Its gaping 4,260 foot span had to be high enough to allow ocean going vessels to pass under, even in summer when the bridge is 12 feet lower, due to steel cable expansion.

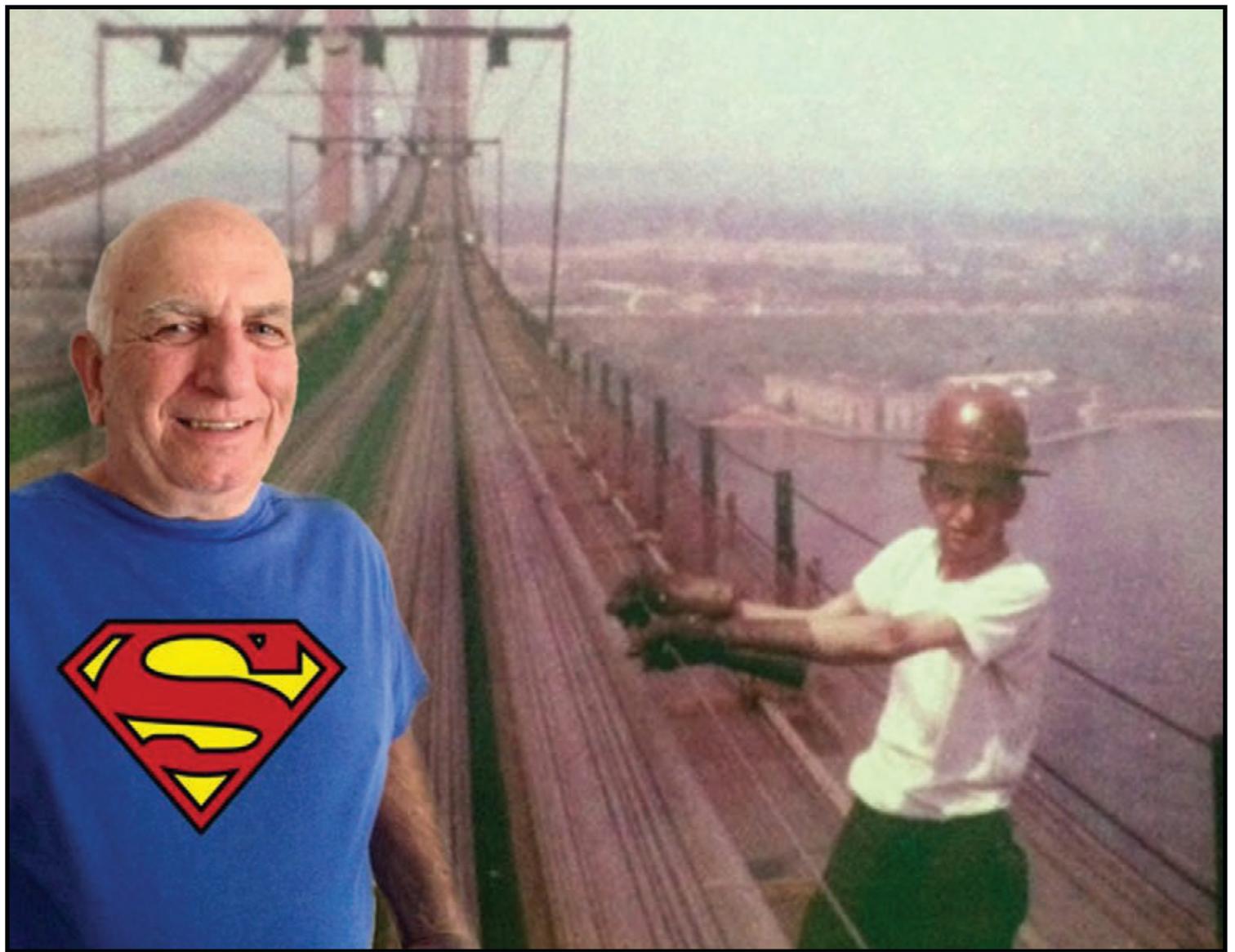
Less than a day after being hired, Rich was summarily fired. The problem was not his diminutive stature, but the fact that he was still only 17 years old.

Rich sat for three weeks in the union office mulling over his dismissal and wondering what he'd done wrong, until, on his 18th birthday, his union representative called out his name and then broke into a snappy rendition of "Happy Birthday." The last verse ended, "there's a job for you!" and sent Rich off to a different gig.

Once the towers were erected, Rich worked for the American Bridge Company, spinning the massive cables that give suspension bridges their awesome strength and distinctive profile. It was hard, unforgiving work, and not for the faint of heart.

The first step onto the catwalk, where these men of steel spent freezing January mornings and scorching July afternoons, was a step to remember.

If you can picture a 20-foot wide,



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unenclosed, trampoline, made of cyclone fencing, suspended 400 feet or more above the gray, frigid water, you will have an idea of what it was like.

The water temperature wasn't even a concern because, if you fell from that height, hitting the water was like hitting concrete.

After the first few tentative steps, these steel monkeys soon felt right at home, so much so that they were known to slide down the cables on scraps of cardboard like kids on a toboggan hill.

It was great fun, until one inevitable day, when Rich and his buddies watched their friend and co-worker plunge to his death when his makeshift sled went awry. One of them was left holding his torn shirt sleeve after a desperate, unsuccessful attempt to halt his fall.

Rich worked on the bridge un-

til its official opening on Nov. 21, 1964, and he continued to work on the unopened lower deck for another year and a half. Ironically, those who worked on the bridge after its opening, had to pay the 50-cent bridge toll to go to work. This provoked some of them so much that they threw

their commemorative "thank you" pins from the New York Port Authority into the toll basket in place of the required change. When the bridge opened, its price tag was \$365 million. Today it brings in more than that annually, thanks to a toll rate of \$13.

Rich and his fellow steel workers can be proud of what they've done in creating a majestic 49-year-old monument to human ingenuity. They may not have the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but they are, indeed, men of steel.

