

Family ties proved Ayers' point

By **Ron Grossman**, Tribune reporter

Chicago Tribune

May 18, 2008

A funny thing happened to Bill Ayers in the years between his first headline-grabbing activities and his cameo role in the 2008 presidential campaign. He became a pillar of the very establishment he had once conspired to bring down.

When questions were first raised about Barack Obama's relationship with Ayers, including their serving together on the board of a charitable foundation, Chicago's elite rallied behind Ayers.

Mayor Richard Daley proclaimed Ayers, an educational consultant to the city, "a valued member of the Chicago community."

"I don't condone what he did 40 years ago, but I remember that period well," Daley said. "It was a difficult time, but those days are long over."

Ayers, 63, was less charitable about Daley's father, who was mayor in 1968 when Vietnam War activists tried to disrupt the Democratic National Convention.

"White and fleshy, he reeked with the stench of evil," Ayers wrote of Richard J. Daley in his 2001 memoir, "Fugitive Days."

Ayers' round trip -- from a privileged childhood to the bomb-making wing of '60s radicalism and back up the social ladder -- shows he got one thing right in his critique of America:

Whom you know is as important as what you know. Being to-the-manor born is all but a lifetime guarantee that doors will be opened.

Ayers' father, Thomas Ayers, was CEO of Commonwealth Edison as well as a trustee of Tribune Co. and chairman of the board of Northwestern University.

Ayers was raised in Glen Ellyn, played football at Lake Forest Academy and graduated from the University of Michigan. He joined the Weatherman faction of the Students for a Democratic Society movement, and in the 1970s went underground -- "fleeing what the government winkingly calls justice," as he put it.

"My weapons were explosive words at first, slowly replaced by bombs," he wrote.

He broke Michigan Avenue shop windows during the Weathermen's 1969 "Days of Rage." He helped LSD guru Timothy Leary break out of prison, Ayers wrote in his memoir, and stockpiled stolen dynamite. Some exploded in a New York townhouse, killing members of what came to be known as the Weather Underground, including his girlfriend of that time. Other explosives were planted in government buildings, including the Defense Department's.

"We'd already bombed the Capitol, and we'd cased the White House," Ayers wrote. "The Pentagon was leg two of the trifecta."

In 1980, he resurfaced, accompanied by his wife, Bernardine Dohrn, and two children born in their underground years. His life quickly returned to normal. Criminal charges were dropped because the government's evidence was tainted. He earned a doctorate in education at Columbia University and joined the faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Dohrn's post-revolutionary successes are even more remarkable, considering she was the more notorious. During their underground days, she made the FBI's 10 most wanted list. Upon surfacing, Dohrn got three years of probation and a fine.

Today, Dohrn is on the faculty of Northwestern University's School of Law. She teaches a course titled Children in Trouble with the Law.

Neither Ayers nor Dohrn returned e-mail or phone messages asking for comment. So we cannot tell you how they see their ascent back to responsibility.

But it's hard for an outsider not to see the map of family connections behind their paths.

Ayers' father moved in philanthropic circles with Howard Trienens, an attorney with the powerhouse firm of Sidley Austin. The two served together on Northwestern University's Board of Trustees. Ayers was chairman of that group, then handed the post off to Trienens in 1986.

Trienens headed Sidley Austin when the firm hired Dohrn in 1984. She had never practiced law and had been out of law school for 17 years.

When I asked Trienens if he had hired Dohrn, he replied: "Yes."

Wasn't that a bit of nepotism, considering his relationship to her father-in-law? A lot of lawyers would love a first job with such a prestigious firm.

"We often hire friends," replied Trienens, 84.

Yet Dohrn wasn't licensed to practice law. Though she passed the bar exam, the ethics committee turned her down because of her rap sheet. That limited the type of work she could do at Sidley Austin, which she left after a few years.

"Dohrn didn't get a license because she's stubborn," Trienens said. "She wouldn't say she's sorry."

That's not all she refused to say. In 1981, Dohrn was summoned before a federal grand jury investigating an armed robbery involving other members of the Weather Underground. She refused to cooperate, for which she served seven months in jail.

Dohrn's route to Northwestern is harder to discern. Trienens said he had nothing to do with it, though he was then board chairman.

"The dean hired her," he said, referring to Robert Bennett, who was then law school dean. (Bennett did not return phone calls seeking comment.)

Daniel Polsby, a law school faculty member in 1991, recalls Dohrn's appointment going through an academic side door. Because she was brought on as an "adjunct," she was never put before a faculty vote.

Seeking clarification from the university, I was told to put my questions in writing. Which I did:

Was her appointment at NU's law school made by the dean acting alone? Did it have to be ratified by the Board of Trustees?

Instead of answering the questions, the university responded with a boilerplate statement of support: "While many would take issue with views Ms. Dohrn espoused during the 1960s, her career at the law school is an example of a person's ability to make a difference in the legal system."

Some also might take issue with Dohrn's more recent actions, like stiffing that grand jury in 1981. Critics can be forgiven for questioning what kind of example that sets for law students.

The Ayers and Dohrn story can be read as a tale of redemption, albeit lacking an act of contrition. Or it could be seen as verifying Ayers' conviction that life's playing fields aren't level. There is one set of rules for those with the good fortune to live in places such as Glen Ellyn or Kenwood, where the couple lives now. There is another set of rules for the rest of American society.

In his memoirs, Ayers put the issue succinctly: "Why all the pretense of equity when some people get four or five outs to the inning while others get only two?"

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