In 1960 when a young Armando Colafranceschi painted residential buildings in Toronto for a living, he had no designs on becoming a union organizer. In fact, he knew little about an organization drive. What he did know was that times in the fast-growing city were becoming increasingly difficult for residential tradespeople like painters and plasterers. A strong commercial building union dominated the scene, and it wasn’t readily accepting residential tradespeople into the fold.

Something had to be done to change the fortunes of his trade. Colafranceschi led the way, organizing Local 1891 of the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades. “I had to get 35 names and apply for a charter to get the local off the ground,” Colafranceschi told me recently.

Forty-three years later, Loc. 1891 and its 2,700 members is going strong. It is the largest local in the international union, thanks largely to hard work by people like Colafranceschi. Today he continues to play a major role in the union that has worked hand in hand with organizations like the Interior Systems Contractors Association to resolve many key industry issues over the years. For his achievements during the past 43 years, he was honored recently at a testimonial dinner hosted by the IUPAT in Toronto.

Colafranceschi says one of the high points of his career was in 1969 when the union local signed a collective agreement with the Metropolitan Builders’ Association (apartment sector). It was a seminal moment for his union because to get work in the booming residential apartment market in Toronto, all trades had to be in the collective agreement. Around that time, Colafranceschi and his local were also instrumental in organizing the drywall tapers, a new trade that took off in the apartment construction sector. Until then, almost all wall and ceiling work was done by plasterers and lathers.

Serving the local as an organizer for the first 15 years, he championed many causes. In 1988 he was appointed an international representative for IUPAT and in 1989 he took the role of vice president of IUPAT for Canada.

Bill Nicholls, business manager of IUPAT District Council 46, says Colafranceschi has made significant contributions to the union as vice president of IUPAT Canada. For example, he has organized political action and streamlined the union across Canada by allowing each district council and local to freely organize and conduct its own administrative affairs.

Hugh Laird, executive director of ISCA, says Colafranceschi has been a steadying influence on the industry: “A lot of other trades go through business agents and executive boards every couple of years. It can be quite de-stabilizing.”

What’s more, Laird says there’s never a hard line during labor negotiations with Colafranceschi. “For him,” Laird says, “it is always about what’s best for the industry and how we can, as management and union, work in partnership to do what is right for the workers and the industry.”

The testimonial dinner was supported by employers and affiliated local unions throughout Canada and the United States. Colafranceschi says he was surprised and honored by the dinner for him.

Recounting that fateful day in 1960 when he attended his first meeting to organize a union, which would change his life, he says, “I guess it was a question of being in the right place at the right time.” That’s been a good thing for him and for the industry.

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.