

Hero of a Different Sort

By

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## Hero of a Different Sort

Twenty-five years ago during a sabbatical I found an inexpensive place to live with my undergraduate fraternity chapter at the University of Iowa. As a 45-year-old I could not re-live my undergraduate days, but the opportunity to live for a time in such close connection with undergraduate students and understand what they were experiencing intrigued me. I signed a housing contract and moved to Iowa City in a 1974 Plymouth station wagon my father bought at a farm auction.

There were adjustments such as getting shaved and showered each morning with a group of twenty-year-olds. And I dealt with a milk machine in the kitchen that never quite got cleaned. A third was managing the “bunks.” In order to make extra space, “bunks” were rigid units bolted to the walls at shoulder height. One had to swing up to bed and leap onto the mattress, but not too high, since the ceiling was only three feet higher.

I wondered just how quiet the house might be for evening study, but my concerns were soon put to rest. Chapter members studied at the university library (really, talked to the women), or played intramurals until about ten thirty each evening. I had plenty of time to read and reflect in solitude.

When ten-thirty arrived, however, studying was nearly impossible, and sleeping was out of the question. After a few evenings I learned many of the men got the munchies about this time and went to a restaurant near the Interstate highway they familiarly called “Ma Perkins”. Of course, I found no difficulty eating and I soon joined their late night table.

These late evening feeds quickly evolved into group counseling sessions, with each man in turn telling his story and asking for affirmation from me as an older man. I learned that the chapter did not have a faculty advisor, nor was any alumni board member in close contact with the men.

I shared how I was recruited by an undergraduate to be a faculty advisor on my own campus. A young man just happened to arrive at my office around noon time on almost a daily basis, and “just happened” to have an extra sandwich and apple in tow. He invited me to sit on the grass between my building and the stream that ran through

campus, told me about his fraternity, and made a friend of me. When the chapter's president asked me to be his fraternity's advisor, the choice was easy.

The brothers at Iowa reacted in disbelief. How were they to go to the front of the lecture hall and make contact with a professor? What would they say to such a person? How could they ever interest a professor to work with them? The task seemed impossible to them. Nevertheless, I challenged one of the men to make the effort, and he successfully recruited his ROTC instructor.

My ten weeks soon passed and it was time to leave. Yes, a 45-year-old could live successfully in a fraternity house, and yes, the experience was positive. The "Ma Perkins" conversations were memorable, parties were loud but fun, and I was accepted without reservation. I shall never forget how warmly I felt in Church on Sunday as I sat with three exceptional young men who never missed Sunday services the entire time I was there, even if Saturday night's house party did not end until 3:00 a.m. Out of this sabbatical experience my own line of research dealing with the college fraternity originated.

One of the young men, a slight-built sophomore who never seemed quite comfortable in his surroundings, sent me the following paper several weeks after I returned to my own campus. At the time his writing skills were, at best, limited. Brendon's (pseudonym) paper described the impact my presence had on his life. His paper became a light in my life, and since that time, whenever I have become discouraged and wondered if anything I did really mattered, I have re-read his paper, an English assignment on which he proudly stated he earned an "A". Brendon is now older than I was when I lived with his fraternity. He is a family man and a successful lawyer in a major city.

### Hero of a Different Sort

Who are the heroes in life? My greatest hero was my grandfather. He escaped Russia around the 1920s, and came to the United States with only a few

cents in his pocket. Before he passed away he used to tell me stories about when he first came to this country. The first thing he saw was the Statue of Liberty. He knew no English and had no friends here. Through hard work he started a small bakery. Soon he was supplying all the bakeries in Chicago. I often thought about how amazing it was that he became so successful.

My father was also a success. He built up his business from scratch. My grandfather lent him money to purchase land and my father became wealthy after he opened up several trailer parks on them. He worked very long hours building his business up to what it is today.

At the age of 35 my mother went back to school. She got her degree in rehabilitation and is now the president of a small corporation. She is expanding her business into new areas and I am very proud of her.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not trying to brag; on the contrary, I am just telling you about the people who are heroes to me. There people are heroes to me because they are financially successful in my eyes. I have always looked at these people as role models. I looked up to other people also, especially many of my family's friends who have made it big.

One day I met this man who did not fit any of my criteria of a hero. He was a visiting professor from another college. He lived in my fraternity house for two months. Before meeting this man I had never really been in contact with a professor outside of class. In fact, I thought that most professors were a little strange. I mean, who would want to spend their entire life in school and get paid below average wages! You would have to be nuts!

This all changes when I met Professor Charles Eberly. His energies were devoted towards learning and helping others learn. I asked him why he chose to be a professor. He said where else could you continue a life of learning and get paid for it.

He had an old station wagon. It was rusty and all beaten up. It did not embarrass him at all. In fact, he was proud of it. It ran and that was all that was important. One night he lent me his car to drive a friend home. I accidentally backed his car into another car. Upon returning the keys to him that night, I said,

“Chuck, I have something terrible to tell you. I backed your car into another car in the street.”

“I know. I saw you do so. Do not worry about it. My wife had done that several times.”

I expected him to be furious, but he did not get upset at all. I was simply shocked.

Soon I began to learn more about this interesting man. He was married and had two daughters. He said he missed them all dearly. He also had an option to stay in our house for free because he was an alumni, but instead he paid for his room and board.

Chuck was almost 50 years old but acted as if he was 25 at heart. In the preceding two months Chuck seemed to be all give, and no take. He helped a good friend of mine land a job and he tutored me and many others. He motivated the house to sing songs to the sororities. He played basketball with us, and cheered us on at football. He tried to get other people to join our house. He was always working for our betterment. Even on campus he would talk to people about our house.

Chuck was sure different from most people I know. He did not have gold dripping from his fingers. I began to realize that wealth and heroism could be two different things. A quote from William Henry Channing sums up my feelings towards Chuck:

To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly; to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never...

This quote reminds me of the great wealth Chuck has. I will always consider this man a hero.

