

Memories of OHS Teacher Dale Brubaker –

by Kerry J. Byrnes (Class of '63)



Dale Brubaker (7/16/37 – 6/6/13)

*“Susan Jacoby, prominent writer at The Washington Post and The New York Times, as well as the author of several books including the best-selling *The Age of American Unreason*, helped me see what I was about as a high school teacher: ‘The best thing a teacher can do for a student is open up a wider world....’” (Dale Brubaker, personal communication. Susan Jacoby, Okemos High School class of 1963).*

Dale Brubaker, born July 16, 1937 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was the son of Methodist minister Herbert C. Brubaker and elementary-schoolteacher Helen Miller Brubaker. He learned music at an early age through piano lessons and learned to play the clarinet, taking lessons from 1949-1951. While in high school, he took an interest in the stage, performing leading roles in Gilbert & Sullivan operettas. While Brubaker would later insist not being a gifted musician and singer, he believed his musical background laid a foundation for him to be an author.

From 1955-1959, while at Albion College from 1955-1959, Dale met Barbara Sue Stewart whom he married on June 11, 1960. Barbara taught second grade while Dale completed his master’s and PhD degrees at Michigan State University. From 1965-1969, Dale was assistant professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara; from 1969-1971, associate professor at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; and 1971-2006, professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro from 1971 until his death in 2013.

Dale particularly loved integrating teaching, research, and writing. He authored or coauthored several books on education and educational leadership, teaching, and dissertation research and writing, including *Creative Curriculum Leadership*; *Staying on Track*; *Creative Survival in Educational Bureaucracies*; *Theses and Dissertations: A Guide to Planning, Research, and Writing*; and *Advancing Your Career: Getting and Making the Most of Your Doctorate*, co-authored with his son Michael. Few things gave him more satisfaction than his students’ accomplishments and growth as educators. As of early 2013, Brubaker was Emeritus Professor of Education, University of North Carolina-Greensboro. On June 6, 2013, at the age of 75, he passed

away after a long battle with prostate cancer (personal communication, Dale and Barbara Brubaker).

Flight Log Memories: During the first semester of my senior year (1962-63) at Okemos High School (OHS), I took the American Government course taught by **Dale Brubaker**. Going into my senior year, none of my teachers during the prior three years had been particularly inspiring. That changed with Mr. Brubaker, it quickly becoming clear that OHS finally had an inspiring teacher, one whom I went home and told my parents about, as evidenced by my parents' delayed 1962 Christmas letter sent out as a 1963 "Cheers for St. Patrick's Day" note. That letter, announcing our family's planned March 15 departure for my father's new job in the Philippines, reviewed our family's exploits during the past year, and noted my discovery of "the excitement of a remarkable teacher (American Government)"—and that teacher was Mr. Brubaker!



Dale Brubaker (Okemos High School, 1963 Tomahawk Yearbook)

When Brubaker walked into the classroom, sharply dressed in sport coat and tie, equivalent in academic cool to the folk music group The Kingston Trio in their striped, button-down sport shirts. He confronted our class enthusiastically with ideas and issues and engaged students in reading and discussing the popular issue-oriented paperbacks of the day, such as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* and John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*. I vaguely recall having some sort of a classic high school text on American Government but I don't remember anything from that book other than that the U.S. government has three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial!

I do remember how interesting and stimulating it was to read those paperbacks. Our class was a forum for the students to discuss our reactions to what we read. One evening my father invited to our home a Jesuit priest, Rev. Owen E. Finnegan, who was studying for a Ph.D. in communication and philosophy at MSU. My father was also studying to earn his Ph.D. in communication. Thus, they likely met taking the same course or pursuing the same goal. I was following the discussion between Father Finnegan and my father when something prompted me to jump into the fray to tell Father Finnegan about Mr. Brubaker's course, the books we were reading, and how I enjoyed his teaching. Interestingly, and I remember it to this day, Father Finnegan



DALE BRUBAKER 1962
Teaches: World History and American
Government
Sponsors: Freshmen Class

commented that American high schools should provide more of this kind of stimulating educational environment such as Brubaker was creating for his students. He had challenged us to think and not just mindlessly regurgitate rote repetition of sanctioned facts. This was Dale's strength, perhaps more than a little bit of which rubbed off on me, not only helping to lay a foundation for an interest in social issues facing our country (and the developing world as I would later discover) but also beginning to steer me toward undergraduate major in sociology (B.A.) and advanced degrees in communication (M.A.) and sociology (Ph.D. with a minor in economics).

It would have been fun and educational to take more classes with Mr. Brubaker. However, I already was a senior and, halfway through the second semester, our family moved to the Philippines. Leaving OHS at this time, I had to complete the last credits needed for graduation by taking an English correspondence course from Indiana University. I finished with an "A" before we left for the Philippines in mid-March. I completed a University of Wisconsin physics course and earned a "C" after arriving in the Philippines. I was so happy to be done with that physics course that I threw the textbook up in the air in our living room and never saw it again; I have no idea whatever happened to that book.

I had no contact with Mr. Brubaker after leaving OHS, until nearly 50 years later when, in mid-2011, I tracked down an email address for a "Dale Brubaker" who just might be the same person I knew in high school in 1962. I emailed this "Dale Brubaker" with the hope that he would be that same person. Bingo, a reply came back from a Dr. Dale Brubaker confirming his identity as my American Government teacher in high school nearly a half century before.

During my subsequent email exchanges with Dale, I learned that he had taken a great interest not only in writing his own personal biography but also in encouraging his students to write their own biographies. Once again, Dr. Brubaker sparked my own interest in writing, this time a series of vignettes about celebrities or "giants" I had met and who had a large or small impact on my life. Indeed, in my chapter on giants in the realm of Spartan Educators, Dr. Dale Brubaker is the subject of one of the book's first two vignettes. The other "giant" is Dr. Donald Yates who was the instructor in the High School Honors Course in Spanish that I took at Michigan State during the summer of 1961, a little over a year before meeting Mr. Brubaker.

Over the next year or so, Dale and I shared pieces each had written, leaving me greatly appreciative of the feedback and guidance he provided. He further encouraged me to reflect on my own life, and how past events and persons I had met over the years impacted my personal life and my professional career.

The following excerpt from Dale's autobiography took me back to my OHS days when I looked forward each day to attending Mr. Brubaker's class:

With the coursework for the Ph.D. completed, it was a good time (1962) to enter high school teaching in Okemos, a town outside of Lansing, Michigan, a one-high school district that was changing from a rural to a suburban culture. . . . High school social studies teaching provided me with an opportunity to draw upon my college and university courses in history, sociology, anthropology and philosophy. I had three preparations: World History, American Government and Economics. Five hours of teaching and one hour off for planning were a challenge in contrast to my previous graduate-student life at Michigan State University.

Full of youthful energy, I threw myself into the work and experienced a mix of excitement, discovery and very hard work that wore me down. Students in morning classes received my best teaching with classes after lunch frequently taught on automatic pilot. I had not learned to pace myself and spent too much time with teacher-centered instruction. Collaborative learning, such as small group work, was simply not part of my repertoire. Giving attention to students' writing also demanded the reading of more than a hundred essays.

Special attention was given to seniors in American Government classes. Monthly seminars were held in our apartment or students' homes with authors of paperback books, Michigan State University professors, as guests. Between fifty and seventy-five students attended these seminars and autograph parties with rich dialogue between students and the professors taking place. ... The sheer joy of these experiences reminds me today that we had, without knowing it, created learning communities of a very different kind in contrast to most high school settings. Students were engaged in intellectual experiences off-campus—experiences that were not part of traditional curricula. Why did we create these high school learning communities? My love of ideas needed a forum outside of the traditional classroom format and students' enthusiasm for contact with professors who authored paperback books read for the seminars, when coupled with their being treated as adult learners, gave them special status.

The novelty of this innovation gave us energy and optimism. We introduced these seminars with no doubt in our minds that they should and could be held. ... [Another] reason for the seminars is that I wanted to play the role of professor while employed as a high-school teacher. At the end of the three years, 1965, I received the Ph.D. and moved into university culture. (Dale L. Brubaker, *The Making of an American Educator*)

During the drafting of this essay, I stayed in touch with Dale, our most recent email exchanges from February 9-11, 2013 providing encouraging feedback, as follows:

- “I have a suggestion [for you] to consider. How about putting the ‘header quote’ at the front end of your essays so that it sets the stage for the reader’s introduction to the subject of the essay?” (2/9/13)
- “I can’t recall specific examples but my general feeling as a reader is that I would like to graphically know the subject of your essay as soon as possible and it seemed to me that a photo and quote or two in the words of the subject would get me there in a hurry.” (2/10/13)
- “You are the potter at the wheel, Kerry, and when it feels right to you, you will know it. I assume there will be a foreword, preface or the like that sets the stage.” (2/11/13)
- “Kerry, this is really smooth and interesting. There is richness and variety in your profiles. Congratulations on not being constricted by academia. Your life is the richer for seeing all of life as curriculum.” (2/11/13)
- “Kerry, I really like the changes as they bring a most interesting flow to your project.” (2/11/13)

These February email exchanges were precipitated by some feedback Dale had given me in a prior email in which he thanked me for an update I had sent to him and in which he shared that:

It is only natural that we go in and out of funks and many is the night I would go to sleep simply hoping the morrow would return my optimism, energy, etc. It almost always did. I give thanks that I

have slept very well in the 10 months since I began chemo. I always focus on something good I have experienced—something that continues to give me joy. (Dale Brubaker, personal communication)

Over the next couple of months of 2013 I was quite busy at work, including several trips to Central America, but in my spare time I kept plugging away on the overall memoir-type book that I was writing (and of which this essay is a part), and by late May had made enough progress on it that I sent an email to Dale on May 25 to request his mailing address so I could mail to him the manuscript on a thumb/flash drive as the manuscript was too long to print and the file size too big to send as an email attachment.

When Dale did not write back, I tried to reach him at the home phone number he had shared in an earlier email. I tried the number several times but only got the answering machine. When I didn't hear back from him after several days, I first thought that he and his wife might have gotten an early jump on spending time at their summer cabin in Michigan.

I again tried again to reach Dale by phone on the morning of Saturday, June 8 (2013). This time Dale's wife, Barbara answered the phone. I told her who I was and she replied that she had known from Dale about my writing project. She shared the devastating news that Dale passed away just two days before on June 6, having lost his long battle with cancer. This news devastated me almost as much as the passing of my own parents, my mother in 1984 and my father in 1999.

My conventional approach to writing these vignettes evolved from initially sharing a memory or two about a celebrity or a "giant" but eventually, based on feedback from Dale, I began to put the biography of the vignette's subject first and then the "Flight Log Memories." When I sent draft vignettes to Dale for his review and comment, he often shared his memories of some of the same people I wrote about, as he did in the next to last email that he sent to me on February 11, 2013, in which he shared the following about then MSU President John Hannah (whose vignette I had shared with Dale).

A colleague told me that John Hannah personally signed all graduates' diplomas and some faculty objected saying it was a waste of time. A friend of mine, a professor of philosophy at MSU, George Kerner, said that John Hannah met a foreign student on a plane during an overseas journey. The student didn't have a major and so Hannah sent a letter to the head of the philosophy department saying that he was sending over a new doctoral student he recently met. (Dale Brubaker, personal communication)

In the larger "book" of which this Brubaker vignette is a part, this anecdote about John Hannah serves as a transition to the vignette I wrote about **John Hannah** as the greatest Spartan Educator. In concluding this Brubaker vignette, I noted that Hannah would be proud that one MSU student, Dale Brubaker, whose graduate diploma Hannah signed, carried the banner for Spartan education over the next half century from coast to coast—to the West (University of California-Santa Barbara), the Midwest (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), and the Southeast (University of North Carolina-Greensboro)—with Dale first starting his teaching career at Okemos High School!

Sadly, too focused on communicating with Dale through our email exchanges, I didn't pick up the phone sooner to try and talk with him during what turned out to be the last year of his life.

Not to leave this vignette about Dale Brubaker on such a sad note, his memory clearly lives on with the students he inspired and, in my own case, helping me to better define the direction that I would take not only in my studies at Michigan State University (B.A. & M.A.) and Iowa State University (Ph.D.) but also, perhaps unknowingly at the time, in the professional career that I would pursue over the coming decades.

While some, having had different experiences in Dale's classes, might disagree, his approach to creating an educational environment for student learning at OHS opened many students' eyes to a much wider world than they had known in their prior OHS classes. Indeed, one could argue whether one's learning experience at OHS was different (and for the better) having studied under Dale as a freshman vs. as a senior (the latter being my own experience). Where might my career have gone had I had the opportunity to take a course from Dale during my freshman year?

In any case, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to say that Dale at OHS was the academic equivalent to Jim McKay's "Wide World of Sports" (ABC TV – 1961-1998). Paraphrasing McKay's catchphrase -- "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," Dale helped to open students' eyes to "the thrill of ideas and the agony of issues."

Dale Brubaker – gone but definitely never forgotten and still making an impact!