

The teacher who tamed the kid who wouldn't behave

Zev Singer

The Ottawa Citizen
June 16, 2004

Since he left Quimby, Iowa, population 300, he has learned Spanish, French, Italian and Catalan. As an afterthought, he remembers he has also learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Old English.

Yet it's taken much of his 52-year life for Greg Bloomquist, a professor at Saint Paul University, to believe he isn't a failure.

An award as one of Ottawa's top educators is not something many people would have envisioned for the young Greg, a kid who couldn't behave in class.

The sky was big, but life felt small as he grew up in the 1950s and early '60s in a village near the western edge of the corn-growing state. His grandparents, all four Swedish, were farmers. His father was a grain elevator operator. His only sibling, a sister, was 13 years older.

Anything in life that was exciting seemed far beyond Quimby, if not over the rainbow.

His mind wasn't on studies and he couldn't pay attention in class -- at least to the right things. Even though his grades weren't bad, it didn't look like he'd have a future as a scholar. His lifeline was a shortwave radio. The little box connected him to the wide world: oceans and mountains and cities and people. People by the millions.

He didn't have to understand their languages to feel the excitement of just knowing they were out there. What he wasn't sure of was that he'd ever see any of it.

When the unexpected break came, it was through a program the Des Moines Register ran for its delivery boys, providing scholarships to some of the most exclusive private schools in the U.S., offering them to bright Iowa children who wouldn't otherwise even think of going.

He applied and, to his great surprise, was accepted. He was 14 and he was off on a big adventure. Adjusting to his new surroundings wasn't easy. He was very self-conscious of his humble origins after being "thrown in with rich kids from the eastern seaboard."

He had a tough time with what he remembers as the prevailing educational philosophy at the school: motivation through extremely tough grading. The class average was C-, he remembers.



CREDIT: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen
Greg Bloomquist tries to give students a 'flesh and blood' feel for the times that they're studying.

"The reason for that was there's a feeling that if you push them down they'll fight back, so if you give them a lower mark they'll work harder," he says. "I had the feeling that I could never do anything really well enough."

His grades were bad and the school wasn't impressed. "They wanted to send me home."

The worst part was that he was almost ready to agree. It would put him right back in Quimby and the smallness that never had fit him, but at least he'd be with his parents, who missed him and who, by now, he missed quite desperately himself.

Coming home would save his parents a lot of money -- even with his partial scholarship, the expenses were considerable for his blue-collar dad. Laurence Bloomquist had been reluctant to see his boy move so far away. But the man knew his son needed something he wasn't going to get in Quimby. The letter from the school brought a defiant response back from Iowa.

"Dad said, 'No. Give him a chance.' I still think to this day that was a major thing that my dad did."

He stayed and slogged it out. In second year, for the second time in his life, he found hope through a small window into the wide world. Through his shortwave, he had listened to broadcasts from Ecuador and Cuba, the Spanish voices so new, not just in their words but in their intonations and rhythms. They held infinite possibilities -- for new ideas, new ways of seeing the world. Now, when Miguel Buisan, a Spaniard, spoke in Greg's language class, it was as if the classroom became a little part of Spain.

He can't remember what the teacher's pedagogical techniques were, or exactly what he said or did to engage his students. Yet somehow, Mr. Buisan had a way of making them forget it was a classroom. The desks and blackboard and tests seemed to blend into the background, while something more real emerged.

Somehow the man at the front of the class managed the trick that the best educators always have. He became not just a "teacher," but a person. He didn't do that by sharing his private life, but just in the way he talked to the students, as if it were understood between everyone in the room that there were fascinating things to discuss and there was no time to waste.

"He really stands out in my mind as someone who really saved my life in many ways," he says of his former teacher. "Under his teaching, I suddenly found myself being able to perform, to do a good job."

He went from perhaps the school's poorest student of Spanish, to one of its very best. His confidence, though still fragile, was gaining a toehold.

"I could do something," he says, the surprise at this still in his voice as he remembers. "I was doing something really well, and it rippled through all my other courses."

He did well enough to win a spot on an exchange program to Spain, which sparked a lifelong love for the country and its culture. Although he would spend much of the next decade in Spain, Bible scholarship became his field. In Spain, he embraced his Christian faith and he is now an Anglican priest.

But, as he sees it looking back, before his own path could emerge, he needed Mr. Buisan. Although it probably didn't need to be a Spanish class -- the right history teacher would likely have done the job -- he desperately needed something to stimulate his mind and his confidence.

It would take years and the help of a few other great teachers, and his wife, to finally believe in himself. But what he got from that Spanish teacher is what he sees as the crucial initial step.

"The first hurdle was being able to overcome the feeling that I'm a failure and just having some teacher there who was the means whereby that happened, however it happened."

For the last 18 years, he's been teaching biblical analysis at Saint Paul. From his experience, he knows that what the students take from his class won't always be the details of textual studies. Sometimes it will be the encouragement and the effort he puts in to make his class feel as real as Mr. Buisan's.

Through an approach known as socio-historic analysis, he tries to give his students a "flesh and blood" feel for the times in which the New Testament was written. He does that, in part, by showing them the popular reading materials of the day.

"People who consider themselves Christian today don't just read the Bible," he says. "They have TV, they have newspapers, they have radio. The entertaining literature of the day was not the Old Testament and not the Hebrew scriptures in the day of Jesus. It was all this other stuff."

Rabbinical parables and stories of the day, he says, were "more interesting, more dramatic, more exciting -- sometimes a little bit more racy."

The other way to make an impact on students, he says, is to show them he cares by working hard for them. An early pioneer of Internet-based study, he has been posting his lecture notes on the web for years. He also gives feedback on the essays he marks.

"It takes a lot of work to make everything available to them," he says of his electronic efforts, but he's determined to be there for the students who will need him the way he once needed Mr. Buisan.

Alexandra Gruca-Macaulay says it's working. The 45-year-old student says that after years as a stay-at-home mom, she came to Saint Paul with no confidence.

"I was so convinced that I didn't belong, that I had nothing to say, that everybody else would be so far advanced beyond me," she says.

But in Mr. Bloomquist's class, where all questions were good questions, self-doubt was chased away. Now she's headed for a PhD.

"Eventually, the voices became quietened more and more and more," she says, "because of his encouragement."

- - -

Excellent Educators

Sixteen Ottawa teachers were honoured by their peers for outstanding contributions to their profession. The Capital Educators' Awards recognize people 'who have made a significant impact on the lives of their students by acting as role models, instilling confidence and nurturing leadership.' Students, parents and teachers nominated 253 educators for the event, organized by the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation. The awards recognize teachers working for publicly funded elementary or secondary schools, colleges or universities in the City of Ottawa. There were 16 winners. The Citizen is profiling each.

Ran with fact box "Excellent Educators", which has been appended to the story.