A Heartfelt Tribute to Dr. Lou Brown: A Well-Intentioned Manipulator

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This past spring, late one evening, my colleague and friend, Dr. Julie Causton called to tell me my “academic Dad” passed away. I was filled with shock and sadness and we immediately reminisced with many stories of laughter and shared our gratitude for Lou Brown, a man whose accomplishments are inconceivable. Lou was a father to the field of special education and a giant in the disability community. As his final doctoral student, it is an honor to have been asked to write a Tribute and put my remarks into words on his and others’ behalf.

Lou Brown, PhD, was a fierce advocate for all students, especially those with the most significant support needs. For those who worked closely with him, we knew Lou was a complex man. I was first introduced to him as a young undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Pursuing a degree in special education, I was required to enroll into an introductory disability course. In this class, I was introduced to Lou’s gift for igniting the inner flames of justice in the students he taught. Through blunt, edgy, and sometimes controversial stories (as later recorded in his Lou Brown Unplugged DVD), he purposefully presented arguments in class which prompted debate and disagreement. An untrained political eye—focused only on literal interpretations of his stories—would often be easily offended. He relished this. A great lecturer, he loved nothing more than influencing the young minds of students. Through hundreds or thousands of these lectures, his cumulative efforts led to international leadership that transformed the lives of people severely marginalized into valued citizens and respected human beings.

After completing my introductory course, I continued my studies as a preservice teacher in Lou’s trademark teacher education program. I would learn about the label “Brownie,” which referred to those of us who learned from and carried out his unwavering vision for all people being included and leading enviable lives. Over time, I came to realize I would forever be associated with this family tree of generations of pioneering graduates who he strategically placed across the globe to effectively implement his vision. In his small, rickety, colorless office on Murray Street in Madison, he proudly displayed his family “Hall of Fame” academic tree and frequently referenced them in stories so future impressionable graduates would know their historical significance. It was here, in this simple office, where we would meet as undergraduates, picking up our assignment binders from his closet, which was filled with mounds of paper. These binders, some packed with hundreds of pages, represented many year-long intensive projects he assigned to his students. While we were not fully aware at the time, these binders represented carefully crafted ways to train our minds to raise expectations and value for people with disabilities within the educational system. In turn, they demanded arguably more thought and effort than most other undergraduate teaching programs, and even some graduate, teaching program assignments.

In my career as a teacher, university instructor, and now, as a superintendent in the northern suburbs of Chicago, I have truly come to appreciate the rigorous learning and pioneering field placements Lou created in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), which continue to shine as a national model as a result of his partnership. With my undergraduate degree in hand, I was hired to teach in MMSD. There, I

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came into contact with more members of the “Brownie” family tree. This network of outstanding leaders, which so profoundly shaped my thinking, was led by Dr. Jack C. Jorgensen, who was the Executive Director of Educational Services at the time. I realized I was part of the system of support required for transforming segregated environments into inclusive ones. After several years of teaching and implementing Lou’s vision with the district’s support, I reached a point in my life where I felt a personal plateau, uncertain about what I wanted to do next. I turned to my “academic Dad” for guidance.

Lou mapped out two options. The first sent me driving the beautiful Pacific Coast Highway in California to meet with my other “Brownie” siblings who were located in San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. He knew of my dream at the time to live, work, and play in California. While on that drive, I discussed various teaching opportunities and I secured potential employment. The second option was full-time graduate education under Lou’s advisement, which included teaching and project assistant responsibilities. Sitting at his office table, he presented the details of this offer. He pulled out an outline he scratched out on a manila folder. It included the courses I would need to complete by semester. On the back, it included the financial offer that would cover full tuition and all housing and related expenses. This golden parachute—to graduate without debt, attend a premier institution like University of Wisconsin–Madison, and continue studying with one of the most influential scholars in the field—meant the world to me as a young man who grew up near poverty. The choice was easy. Education first. Years later, I would learn he knew what my decision would be, long before my Pacific Coast Highway drive. He was a master of well-intended manipulation.

As I made my way through graduate school, “Dad” required me to become experienced in the court system and the highest levels of educational leadership and policy. As an expert witness in court proceedings, he coached me on how to dismantle outdated federal and state policies, which negatively impacted the lives of students and families with disabilities. In countless hours of conversations in his office, he repeatedly stated that it is not up to the most marginalized individuals to carry the burden of dismantling segregation. That work is up to all the rest of us. When I was an aspiring school leader, we spent many car rides driving from Madison to the far south side of Chicago to work with some of the most impoverished and well-meaning high schools. There, we advocated for reshaping student schedules so racially diverse students with disabilities who were in the Illinois foster care system could have progressive transition services focused on careers in natural community environments. He taught me and countless others that living, working, and playing in an integrated society cannot be realized through a segregated educational experience.

As my doctoral years drew to a close and “Dad” announced his retirement, I contacted all known “Brownies” to update the Hall of Fame wall of photos. At his favorite breakfast joint, The Curve, a couple of us representing his final class presented him with a professionally made collage of updated pictures as a retirement gift. Anyone who knew Lou respected that he was not one for large parties, splashy farewells, or focused attention. When the time came for me to cross the graduation stage one last time, I vividly remember all the gratitude I had for a man who forever changed my life and saw something in me I did not see myself.

Since my graduate school days and his retirement, my fierce academic father and tireless advocate continued to model for all of us that a life’s work is never completed, even into your 70s and 80s. Lou was met with the ultimate challenge of taking care of his devoted wife, Pansy, who was met with terminal health challenges. While he purposefully remained out of the limelight to attend to his family, a few of us were occasionally granted the privilege of short telephone calls, texts, or emails with updates often written in his unique style of sentence fragments and all capital letters.

When Pansy passed away, Lou returned to Madison to continue his work and walk the steep university hills once again. I was blessed to have time with him on several occasions at his preferred lunch spot, Paisan’s, for his favorite Meatball sandwich. While he usually was one for never sharing emotion, this now had shifted ever so slightly. I am grateful I had the opportunity to tell him how much he did for me and my life. He said how proud he was of me. Our waiter memorialized this lunch with a picture which would now become our last.

Our final correspondence came just a few months before his passing. He enthusiastically sent me his latest article for publication detailing 50 years’ worth of workforce development for individuals with
disabilities and eagerly waited for my remarks. I shared my latest accomplishment of renaming our school
district to a name that represents and symbolizes his life work on diversity, equity, and inclusion for every
learner, every day. His final short and witty text, as only Lou would say, was written in his characteristic
style: “I am very proud of you. Go to DC with Biden!” Thanks again, “Dad.” We are all proud of you and
forever owe you our debts of gratitude.

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