

“The Pursuit of Truth in the Company of Friends”

Bill Dickinson Remarks
Pioneer Class Reunion
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When we gathered ten years ago I announced a scholarship to support students who had been foster kids, orphans, or delinquents, a living memorial to Page and Eloise Smith. I'd like to review why I did that, what ensued, to thank those of you who have helped, and to invite the rest of you to consider joining our noble adventure.

Those of us who arrived here in September, 1965 received a welcoming letter from Page that summer. He asked us to read *Portrait of the Artist*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and *The Children of Sanchez* to prepare for the Oxford-style debate with which we would inaugurate Cowell College. Citing T. S. Eliot, he said Cowell would be a place of “small pretensions and great expectations.”

I saw that letter as an exciting invitation to step into a larger sense of self, truth, and purpose than I ever had known. That I had been a foster kid was not on my mind. I'd been on my own since I was sixteen and Byron Stookey, Dean McHenry's assistant and a revered role model, helped remove the bureaucratic obstacles to coming here. But Page spoke to the better part. I was an unpolished junior college student who had discovered the thrill of existentialism, loved going to Grace Cathedral to hear Bishop Pike duke it out with theological convention, and was blown away by the boldness of Leonard Bernstein's *Kaddish* Symphony. I was ready to be with people who could relate to that.

And it was here, at UCSC, in Page Smith's Cowell, that I found that. I experienced, for the first time, what it is like to belong to a friendly community in which I was not judged to be a problem but celebrated as its reason for being. For some, it was Camp Cowell. For me it was a safe place in which to pursue my fancies without fear, catch up with my potential, and prepare for an adulthood in which I can feel reasonably proud of the man I see in the mirror each morning. I feel an abiding gratitude.

Of the important lessons Page taught me, two stand out. One, education's finest purpose is to meet young people where they are and, with love and respect, help them to clarify who they hope to become and how to understand, appreciate, and navigate life's puzzling and precarious terrain. Two, you are not complete till you realize that you are an agent of history, and, in the words of Page's mentor, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, ready to say “I will” and mean it.

Ten years ago, when I told our classmate Judy Einzig that I was naming a scholarship for Page, her comeback ignited my imagination: “*If this is going to be a memorial to Page Smith*,” she said, “*it's not enough to give money; you have to show up and be Page Smith.*” Yes, yes: if you know what it is like to be treated a certain way, you can do that for others. This gave rise to what has become the Smith Renaissance Society.

Others soon joined me in the work of being Page Smith, guided by a common purpose, summed up in our motto, borrowed from Cowell: *the pursuit of truth in the company of friends*. We provide funds, mentors, internships, a supportive community, and opportunities to reach out to younger kids. Of a hundred and sixty-six students who have joined us, eighty-three percent have graduated or on track to graduate. I'm told that is better than the UCSC student body as a whole.

One of our students, James, gave me permission to tell you about him. Last summer I got an e-mail from Kelly Weisberg, our chancellor's wife, a law professor at Hastings. Kelly had met James and learned he was interested in law school. She strongly believed that he had the ability to succeed in law school, but thought he would be more likely to perform at his potential if he could take an LSAT prep course. Many pre-law students take these courses. She wanted James to be competitive with those other students. These courses are pricey, costing as much as \$3000. James was willing to run with it, but, Kelly asked me, could we help him get funds to do it?

I saw that he was one of our Smith Collegiate Fellows, so I called his mentor, Cliff Bernie, a local sculptor and early Stevenson graduate, to see how real he thought this was. Quite real, said Cliff. I then called Cheryl Perazzo, our large-souled Financial Aid rep: "*He has a 3.8 GPA with a double major,*" she said. "*Isn't that good?*"

I met James in September. Placed in foster care as an infant, he had been moved fifty times before he was put on his own at eighteen. He never finished middle school. One of his earliest memories was standing before a judge making big decisions for him and being told by his social worker that he was not allowed to speak till he was ten.

Doing what Page might do, I introduced him to Len Edwards, one of the finest dependency judges ever. Len took him seriously and said he'd take him on as an intern if James got into a local law school. Of the three schools that have said yes, he's settled on Hastings where, as befits the poetry of the situation, he will be able to continue meaningful conversation with our Chancellor's wife.

James got this far through native intelligence, bravery, and determination. What we provided is what he, like me when I got here, never had had: a community of friendly people who would take the trouble to know and respect him, see his virtue, and do things responsible people should do when they meet a promising young person struggling to decipher the hieroglyphics of an alien social order. Things Page Smith would do. Soon to graduate with honors, James aims to become a judge before whom no kid will ever be told that he or she cannot speak.

The pursuit of truth in the company of friends.

Walking alone along the ocean, on Peaks Island, Maine, ten years ago I had an idea for a scholarship. Sparked by Judy Enzig's suggestion and blessed with a little band of dedicated folks gathered in Page's daughter Anne's living room or around David Brick's and Mary Male's dining room table, it quickly grew into something durable and good. With the help of a growing group of volunteers, mentors, and donors, miracles keep happening.

Page would love it: caring, competent, committed people stepping forward to say "*I will*" and mean it. If you are one of them, if you ever contributed in any way to our noble enterprise, please stand....Thank you for being gracious, thank you for being real.