

A Unique Addiction

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Justin Bergeman - Photos by John DeVilbiss

When the chancellor's assistant called Larry Severeid to tell him that he was chosen to receive the prestigious Upon Their Shoulders award at Utah State University Eastern's annual Founders Day dinner, he wasn't thrilled.

Unlike most people, he steers away from recognition. Finally conceding, "I'll do it, if I don't have to do anything to promote myself."

A few weeks later, the public relations department sent him an email with an example bio asking him to write one. The example read that so and so was born here, got his degrees there, went on to win this and that award. Severeid was mortified. The prototype looked like an academic obituary. His upcoming retirement is the start of a scholarly adventure, far from the graveyard, he said.

"I'm not going to write that crap about myself!" he exclaimed.

Far from accolades, Severeid said he prefers the quiet victory of watching his students' views change. When they come into class, many tell him that they hate a short story or novel they were assigned to read. Right from the start, his objective is to transform those feelings into awe and wonder for the literature.

"When it works and students are engaged, and I feel it working, it's like a very nice drug," he said. "It feels like I made a contribution."

His dedication is centered on the subject he teaches and students.

"Literature has made me a better person," he said. "Everything I read has taught me to understand other people and why they do what they do. My students come in without thinking much about how people who are different from them feel. They get to experience it through literature."

Severeid prevailed with the PR department and someone else had to write the "crappy" bio about him. Here is the unpolished, unedited version of how he became the socially timid, loud in the classroom, funny, passionate, thoughtful and intellectual professor who owns (and has read), quite possibly, more books than most college professors combined.

It is impossible to know Severeid without understanding where he came from. His father, Ron, was a strict, almost puritanical, Norwegian. He loved to work with his hands, especially outside, and he didn't like talking to people much. Ron and his future wife, Pat, met in Iowa.

"It was a miracle that he got her to marry him," Severeid said, "but somehow he did."

They moved to Santa Monica, Calif., and Severeid's dad thought that it was the most amazing place on planet Earth. Ron worked his way up through the Santa Monica parks department, eventually to superintendent of parks. He went to work every day grooming the parks and when he came home, he went outside to labor in the yard and garden until dark without saying more than a few words. Ron transferred his Norwegian work ethic to his son, but Severeid found his own way to express it.

At 18, Severeid was known by his classmates as a joker and screw-off. They definitely wouldn't have chosen him as "the most likely to become a college professor." By the time he entered college at the University of California, Los Angeles, the only thing he had read were books like James Bond and The Hobbit. In his first literature class, the professor made assignments and Severeid went home and read them. The next day in class, as they discussed the literature, he was bewildered.

"I'd go... really? How did he come up with that?" he recounted. "I thought that my professor had a hotline to

divinity. How did he know so much about what the plays and stories really meant? It was amazing.”

Severeid was hooked. “The art of it all seduced me.”

As a student, speaking in class or asking questions terrified Severeid. He hadn’t developed the confidence, but he read everything he could get his hands on.

He was a graduate student in 1975 when Albert Broadmiller, a professor of Shakespeare, asked Severeid to sit in on one of his lectures. Severeid didn’t notice that one of his high school classmates, Tony Trust, was a student in the class. Severeid was relaxing in the back of the room, likely daydreaming, when Broadmiller called out, “Larry, what do you think?” He scrambled to reply with something intelligent. He left after class and forgot the experience.

Twenty years later, at their high school reunion, Trust approached Severeid with the memory and exclaimed, “I had no idea that you were so brilliant.” Severeid was as shocked as Trust. He continued to think of himself as the high school goof-off that he used to be. Even after teaching college classes for a decade, Severeid didn’t view himself as smart. He still doesn’t. That, some of his students would argue, is part of what makes him a brilliant teacher.

His father was not too happy about Severeid’s passion for literature and subsequent career choice. When he graduated from UCLA with his masters of arts degree, Ron was sure that his son would not find a job anywhere. In some ways, his dad was right. The job market for college professors was extremely tight in 1976.

It all happened by pure accident. A college professor at College of Eastern Utah was killed in a car accident in July of that year. One day Severeid happened to see a job listing on the UCLA English department’s cork board for a teaching position at CEU.

“I tore it down so no one else would see it because there were only two jobs in the whole country that I knew of: CEU and Ohio,” he said. He ran to a local photo booth, took a couple of sullen-looking snapshots for his application and sent it off. As he drove to Price for the interview, Severeid expected to be going to a campus framed by the state’s famous snowcapped mountains. He was shocked to find himself, instead, in Eastern Utah’s high desert. Even so, the campus was beautiful, he said.

The job interview obviously went well and Severeid was thrilled to prove his father wrong. After 40 years of teaching in Price, Severeid has three words to describe his academic experience: “freedom, sweet freedom.”

When he began teaching, the English department was relatively small and that gave him the opportunity to design curriculum and keep it fresh through the years. “No other institution would have given me the freedom to teach so many different authors,” he said.

One semester his introduction to fiction class reads (along with many short stories), *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner. The next semester, he switches to different novels. One semester he took on *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. The variety has kept Severeid engaged and his students interested.

Working at CEU stretched Severeid. When he was in college he was shy. He recalled going to a party where a friend said, “I want to introduce you to these people from Texas.” Severeid jokingly went over and faked a Texan drawl, greeting them with, “Hi Mam!” They said, “That was perfect! We need you!” To his astonishment, they explained that they were in a play and someone had dropped out at the last minute. They needed Severeid to take his place. The production was the next day. Though he had never acted before, Severeid told them he would pinch hit.

To memorize his 80 lines, Severeid stayed up all night studying. When he arrived the next day, he realized that he was in a professional production that was being filmed.

“It was really embarrassing,” he recalled. “I was so nervous that my tongue was cleaving to the roof of my mouth.” The rest of the cast were seasoned actors and they helped him through the production. When he watched it later, it was pretty obvious that he was a novice groping his way through the experience. He was determined to stay away from the stage because he said he failed miserably. When he signed on to teach at CEU, Lee Johnson, drama department chair, was on the hiring committee. They became fast friends. Johnson must have known how to work magic, because he talked Severeid into starring in several productions. In *Happy Birthday Wanda June* by Kurt Vonnegut Jr, Severeid played the lead. The director didn’t want him to wear his glasses on stage. The only problem is that Severeid was blind without them.

“I went into the green room during the production and put my glasses on,” he said. “I forgot to take them off when I went back on stage. During the second half, I thought

'What's going on? I can see!' I realized while I was on stage what I had done."

Performing gave Severeid a high that was similar to the feeling he had when teaching. It was an immediate thrill to hear the audience laugh, both when there was something funny going on and when they were uncomfortable. He became addicted to theater; something he thought he would never do. He went on to star in many productions and direct three plays for the college.

During the summers, Severeid said he indulges his passion for literature and spends eight to 12 hours a day reading. His office is lined with bookcases stuffed to the limit. They are organized according to their time period and region of the world. He has marked them all and remembers the content.

Though he would deny it, Severeid's voracious appetite, mixed with his father's work ethic, created a true professor who, in every way, fulfills the definition of the word scholar. He generously shares additional books and articles with students when they come to his office with questions. He has graded thousands of essays in his career, but he is one of few professors who offers to take a look at students' papers prior to the due date so he can give them suggestions.

After retiring this spring, Severeid plans to spend more time with his two children, Will and Erin, who live in Salt Lake City. There is no doubt that he will keep his summer reading schedule year-round. He has ordered a shelf full of books and is ready to go. That should keep him occupied for a week or two.

~ Renee Banasky