

Inspiring Action: Students and Colleagues Rise to the Aid of Injured Moline Teacher (Updated)

Written by Tushar Rae

Tuesday, 15 February 2011 10:10

(Editor's note: This is an updated version of an article that was originally published in December.)



He was a frightening figure when I first met him, with tattoos of verses in Arabic and lines from literature on his arms, a shaved head, a ragged beard, and the combination of a stern voice and piercing gaze.

As an Indian who is often mistaken for someone from the Middle East, I had received plenty of negative attention from people who looked like him. But I could not avoid him. It was 2002, and Curtis Butterfield was my freshman biology teacher and my coach for the junior-varsity academic team at Moline High School.

Early in the school year, Butterfield gave me a confrontation, but not the one I had been dreading.

“You know this is not your best work,” he said, with the voice and glare used to full effect, “and if you think you’re staying in my class, you need to start doing better work.”

Butterfield “doesn’t invite people to come in and learn; he demands that students learn,” said Nicholas Pitz, a Moline High German teacher and varsity academic-team coach. “Learning is not an option.”

Butterfield was an exacting teacher but also exceedingly generous. To help me learn outside of the curriculum, he gave me access before and after school to his classroom – a place I visited almost daily for four years – and provided me with leftover materials (such as fetal pigs and owl pellets) from biology classes.

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That imposing man, both stern and helpful, is missing – for now.

Although the tattoos and beard remain, Butterfield has lost the authority of his eyes and voice. During a visit in December, he looked down at his mitt-covered hands and had difficulty recognizing people or focusing on conversation. While the mitts are gone now, he still has trouble following a conversation and at times needs questions repeated to him.

But when I was in high school, Butterfield was more than willing to engage in discussions ranging from whether New York City sewers can support the flushed pet alligators of urban legend to how Buddhist beliefs about meditation and achieving nirvana could be combined with orthodox Christian doctrine.

He introduced me to hip-hop and rap, including Outkast and Ice Cube. We discovered a mutual appreciation for Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, a Pakistani singer little-known in the Midwest. Butterfield often used music to connect with his students, and his classroom had posters for artists ranging from Outkast's Andre 3000 and Big Boi to the hardcore band Bloodlet.

Stephen Neujahr, a former student, bonded with Butterfield over a shared interest in heavy music. "When we'd have free time in class, he'd tell me funny stories about his old band, Uphold," Neujahr wrote in a December e-mail.

Butterfield also introduced Neujahr to political organizations, including the radical environmental group Earth First – whose Web site claims it engages in everything from "grassroots organizing and involvement in the legal process to civil disobedience and monkey-wrenching." Like that organization, Butterfield is a believer in direct action.

Amber Andress, a volunteer with Butterfield for the Quad Cities Natural Area Guardians, recalled how Butterfield made seed bombs with his students. These "bombs" – combinations of soil, clay, and the seeds of native prairie grasses and flowers – often grow to look like most people's conceptions of weeds.

"Once he had a cause that he deemed worthy, he didn't hesitate to uphold it, regardless of

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opposition,” Andress wrote in an e-mail. The seed-bomb project also “represents his creativity and unique sense of humor, which was ubiquitous in everything he did.”

In 2004 and 2005, he led the initiative to plant a prairie next to the Moline High School driver-education range.

“That he [Butterfield] took it upon himself to build a prairie on school grounds is amazing,” Neujahr wrote. “Through these and other things, he reinforced my belief in the power of direct action.”

So when Neujahr heard that Butterfield had suffered a serious brain injury, he didn’t hesitate. “I wanted to organize a benefit show for him – not as a form of charity, but to show my solidarity with him as a driven person,” Neujahr wrote.

That January 1 concert – featuring Bent Life, Space Race, Centaur Noir, Maylane, and Is World – raised more than \$2,500.

The show helped Butterfield and his wife cover the costs of child care, gas, food, and other day-to-day needs as Sarah Mason-Butterfield splits her time between home and her husband’s side as he goes through therapy. The additional costs come at a time of reduced income, because Sarah has stepped down from her position as an instructor at Kaplan.

Fellow teachers have also organized a chili and hot-dog dinner as well as a trivia contest, to be held February 26 and dubbed the “Butterfield Brain Bowl.”

Butterfield and his wife have been part of a team of trivia competitors that helps raise money for Moline High’s special-education department, so this benefit “was just fitting,” said Christina Shelton, a social-studies teacher at Moline High and one of the organizers of the event. “We thought he would enjoy that,” she added.

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“He was ... honest about teaching,” recalled Shelton, who started working at Moline at about the same time as Butterfield. “About what was working and what was not. ...

“The students, they are concerned, they want him back,” Shelton said. She added, in a bit of humor that Butterfield would have enjoyed: “Teachers are not climbing on desks as much anymore.”

The Accident

On November 8, Butterfield – who has taught for 14 years at Moline High School – was found in his classroom with a head wound from an unknown cause, though a fall from a desk is the most likely culprit. He was rushed to the Genesis Medical Center’s Illini Campus in Silvis and subsequently airlifted to Genesis Medical Center East in Davenport. Following a neurology assessment at Genesis East, he was airlifted to the University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics to receive further treatment. The injury caused his brain to swell and push down on the brain stem, the part of the nervous system that controls automatic functions needed to sustain life. Because of his youth (he’s 36) and health, doctors were able to remove a part of his skull to allow the brain to swell away from the stem. He remained heavily sedated and intubated for several days.

“Within the first couple of hours, I didn’t know what to think,” Sarah said in an interview on December 18. “Eight hours [after the accident], they had me prepared to be a widow. And then, 12 hours later, he was improving.”

Butterfield’s condition continued to improve, and Sarah passed along his progress in daily e-mail messages. Before long, parts of his personality began to reveal themselves again.

“He even gave me a hug, stroked my back, and, much to my amazement and enjoyment, tried to get a little ‘fresh’ with me,” Sarah wrote in the November 18 update. “Oh! I almost forgot. Eyes are open!”

On December 14, Butterfield arrived at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, where he worked with a physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech pathologist to regain the motor

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skills and vocal abilities he has lost. When I visited him on December 21, he seemed to recognize some people, most obviously Sarah. When she offered her hand to him during their conversation, he grasped it and stroked her fingers.

Because of the injury, he has aphasia, a condition in which word choice and usage are impaired. But there were moments when he was seemingly able to express his thoughts. When he was offered a Christmas package to open, he said he would prefer to finish writing on the Christmas card in his hands: "Once I am finished with what I am doing here," he said.

In December, he had begun to walk, but not in a straight line, and his tentative steps were steadied by a person walking with him and holding a belt around his waist.

"Every brain injury is different," Sarah said in December. "There really isn't a prognosis. The amount of progress he has made says good things about his [potential for] recovery."

On January 27, Butterfield moved from the Rehabilitation Institute to Quality Living, Inc., in Omaha, Nebraska. At Quality Living, Butterfield's care is more focused on therapies, because his medical condition is more stable.

Now, he has started to walk on his own, without any support, but he hasn't yet developed a complete awareness of his own limits. "Sometimes he heads into seven-foot snowdrifts," Sarah said. But, she added, "you don't get better at walking unless you are walking."



At the facility, which Sarah says "feels like small college campuses," Butterfield has started working on the day-to-day tasks that will help him when he makes the transition home. The facility incorporates needed therapy into activities a person already enjoys, Sarah said. For Butterfield, an avid tea drinker, this "tri-dimensional therapy" consists of making and serving

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cups of tea during the day.

He also used to be a regular bike-rider, and he has started to ride a stationary bike; the hope is to shift to a recumbent bike outside as the weather improves.

In a conversation on February 8, he seemed to be aware of his situation, but was also quick to insert humor into the conversation: When I told him that I lacked any Valentine's Day plans, he joked, "That probably is a good thing."

In the December visit, he seemed to have trouble remembering me. But in our recent conversation, he had a clearer idea of who I was. He was able to vaguely remember that we once shared a meal at an Indian restaurant, and when I offered to have my mother send him some Indian food, he requested daal, an Indian soup-like lentil dish.

Sarah hopes to have him home in about three months – "a blink of an eye in a lifetime" – and is working to introduce him to all of the aspects of his life before the accident.

The most important of these is Clara, his two-year-old daughter, whom he has not seen since the accident. Sarah recounted that in a recent conversation, she asked, "Do you want to see Clara?" Butterfield promptly offered, "Heck yes!"

"To a momma, that just breaks your heart," Sarah said.

The last medical milestone Butterfield has to reach is the replacement of the brain bone slat, a surgery that Sarah hopes will take place sometime in March. When bone slat is put in, "things seem to reconnect and come together" for patients with traumatic brain injuries, she said. "On bad days, that provides some relief."

The Memories

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Knowing that many people had Butterfield stories and sentiments to share, at the end of December I sent out an e-mail using Sarah's daily-update contact list. In less than 24 hours, my inbox had more than 30 long and varied memories about Butterfield.

Former students wrote about finding a bond with Butterfield over things ranging from hardcore music to the martial arts to his love for the environment. Mostly, they wrote about the way he helped shape an understanding of their responsibilities in and to the world in which they lived.

"His work ethic and desire for people to just do their best has influenced me ever since the ninth grade," wrote former student Anna Hernstrom. "He inspired me to go out of my way to help out, whether it's the extra mile or just a couple steps to pick up a stray piece of trash off the street."

Fellow teachers wrote about the excellence of his craft in the classroom and his work to promote science outside of it.

"When I have a question that Google can't solve, Curtis is the man to go to," said fellow Moline science teacher Kelly Menge. "His passion for the environment and for being in-touch with nature is infectious."

For Butterfield's work, Jacquelyn Fitzpatrick (chair of the Moline High science department) and Pitz nominated him for the 2004 John Deere Harvester Special Recognition Award. "His ability to connect with students is demonstrated in part by the fact that individuals who might be identified as 'at risk' will often stop in before and after school to catch up on the latest science happenings," they wrote in their nomination letter.

As someone who spent nearly every day after school in his classroom for four years, I saw many students stop by and talk with Butterfield about everything from the sound qualities and mechanics of subwoofers to the shocking effects created by a Van de Graaff generator to global climate change.

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His giving nature wasn't limited to the classroom. He helped his wife's college roommate move, brought snakes to Girl Scout meetings to help them learn about reptiles, performed a marital-arts demonstration during Moline High School's annual winter-holiday fundraising effort, and drove from South Carolina (where he was attending Clemson University) to Minnesota several times to support a high-school friend who struggled to decide where to attend college.

Still, even when remembering him fondly, friends and former students used words such as "tough," "rigid," and "gruff."

"I would always say [to Butterfield that] you get more with sugar," Sarah said, "and he would say, 'No, you don't.'"

Sarah said she thinks her husband attempted to balance his belief that the world was doomed with constant efforts to improve it. "I think that was part of his own internal struggle," she said. "I think it kept him up some nights."

She added that the conflict made him mysterious even to her: "I guess it's the one thing I have always wondered about him, too."

Before his accident, on his Facebook page, Buttefield wrote: "I am not convinced of the meaning of anything. I probably don't trust whatever it is that we base our daily lives on"

That existential questioning remains. In our conversation at the end of December, I offered, "Lots of people love you, especially your wife."

"Love. People still believe in that?" he asked with a smirk.

Moline High School teachers have organized a February 26 chili and hot-dog dinner and trivia night to be held at the Black Hawk State Historic Site lodge in Rock Island. The dinner will run from 4 to 6 p.m., and the trivia night will begin at 7 p.m.

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Teachers at Moline High School have also organized a benefit taco dinner at Mulligan's Valley Pub (310 West First Avenue in Coal Valley) on March 29 from 5 to 9 p.m.

For information about upcoming benefit events, updates about Butterfield's progress, and memories of Butterfield, visit CurtisButterfield.com.

Tushar Rae is a former editorial intern for the River Cities' Reader.