



WABASH COLLEGE

Class Agents Letter

Office of Alumni Affairs

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Class of 1970

Class Agents

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Since we last visited, so much has happened. We rejoice with the victories, we mourn the tragedies on both corporate and individual levels. Where to begin....

News from the College...

The college's investigation into the passing of a freshman pledge at the Delt house this fall from alcohol abuse has resulted in the College withdrawing recognition of the fraternity and converting the property to a residence hall.

The **football team**, led by new coach Erik Raeburn, had a fabulous season, ending the regular season at 9-1. The lone blemish was the Monon Bell game (ARGH!!!). By virtue of their conference championship, they qualified for the D-III playoffs and began with a road victory over Case Western in a thriller, 20-17. Their luck ran out at home against Wheaton, 59-28. Still a great season, however.

The **basketball team** under veteran coach Mac Petty is 2-3 as of this writing with one loss coming to DePauw (AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!!!!!!).

The **annual giving** for the year ended June 30, 2008 was an unqualified success. Total alumni donors topped 4,000 for the first time in 5 years (37.7%). The total of \$3.1 million raised set a record and resulted in an early completion of the Hays Challenge. An additional \$1 million will be added to the endowment by Tom Hays '55. Eighty of our classmates (42.8%) participated in this historic occurrence (tied for 9th among all classes).

Forbes.com recognized Wabash as one of the 12 best colleges in America, the highest rank achieved by any Indiana institution and above all other "peer institutions" in the Midwest. Their rankings are driven largely by student opinion, a key factor in our school's historically high ratings in the **National Student Survey of Student Engagement**.

Construction on the new Kappa Sigma house continues. We're glad to see they are keeping up with the Phi Deltas.

Perspective



Kappa Sigma Fraternity at Wabash College



News from You...

With sadness we report the passing of **Tom Topper, M.D.** He succumbed to cancer on October 12. As class agents, we were privileged to receive updates from his wife and best friend **Gina** on his progress following surgery in June. **Gary Vincelette** visited Tom frequently during his illness, and participated in the funeral service. I had a long talk with Tom while I was in Evansville this summer for a wedding, and he spoke about the things that were dear to him: his children, his wife and his college. He and his family were blessed with many loving friends. We send our condolences to the entire family.

Steve O'Neal, Ph.D., reports he is currently an Organic Chemistry professor at Chandler Gilbert Community College in Chandler, AZ. CGCC is part of the Maricopa County Community College District, the largest of its kind in the world with ten separate campuses. He is in the process of developing a new degree program in Biomedical Research Technology, as well as assisting in the design of a chemistry lab suite for a new physical science building on his campus. His bride of 38 years **Cheryl** continues to teach first graders.

The Alumni Office lists the following as "lost alumni": **Jay Armstrong, Alfredo Barascout, Jon Baughman, Richard Best, William Bixby, David Condon, Dorris Hulet, John Dragoo, Richard Jeffries, Robert Johnson, Russell Johnson, Van Jump, Stephen Kurnava** and **Frank Walker**. If you can be of any help in removing them from the side of the milk carton, let us know.

I have written a separate addendum to this class letter on the passing of **Bill Placher**.

We wish you and yours a joyous holiday and peace in the coming year.

Dave and Mike

IT WASN'T A BAD LIFE



As I start to set pen to paper, my objective being to write to you about the passing of Bill Placher on Sunday, Nov. 30, I confess to not being up to the task. His story has been and will continue to be told by his students, colleagues and friends, and told in words more eloquent and fitting than I could ever hope to relate. Therefore, what follows is a collection of snapshots gleaned from past and recent articles, web postings and other materials, both by and about Bill, and in no particular order.

First, I refer you to this week's edition of *The Bachelor* for its excellent student-written article about Bill, and the several remembrances by students, faculty and staff. (<http://bachelor.wabash.edu>)

Perhaps Bill was without peer as a theologian, yet I suspect that all of his writings contained and conveyed a sense of his personal relationship with his God. Gary Phillips, Dean of the College, said Bill was "first and foremost a church man," and his accomplishments were framed around his commitment to teaching the Christian faith. In instructions for the conduct of his funeral written several years ago to his minister, Bill asked that any eulogizing be brief, and demanded, "Let there be a SERMON."

In November 2000, Bill delivered an address to the Presbyterian Covenant Conference in Pittsburgh. Here is the introduction to that talk.

I got this Bible when I was a kid, back in Peoria, for graduating from the fourth grade Sunday School class. It has been with me pretty much ever since. From reading the Bible, more than anywhere else, I have come to know Jesus, my Lord and Savior. If I did not know Jesus, I can't imagine that my life would make much sense, or that I would have had the hope to sustain me in times of darkness. So you need to know that I do not come to you to talk about the Bible as a neutral, objective scholar, but as someone who finds himself on bad days clinging like a drowning person to this book.



Our past newsletters have frequently recounted Bill's many accomplishments and the honors he has received. It could hardly be more understated to say that none of this ever went to his head. Here are some observations about his humility:

I was on sabbatical this year. I spent the year as a Senior Fellow of the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Given some of the things that I've said in print about theology at Chicago over the years, it was particularly generous of them to welcome me so warmly. . . . Thanks largely to the kind comments of my colleagues, and of some of you, I was chosen for this year's Academy of Religion Outstanding Teaching Award. . . . I'm reasonably sure that I'm not the best college religion teacher in the country, since I'm not even the best teacher in this department, but, to the extent that the award was really to our whole department, I think it was well earned.

(Department of Philosophy and Religion 2002 Newsletter, August 1, 2002)

I once commented to Bill that I, along with many others, admired the humility in his teaching and writing. He smiled and said, "Humble people don't write books." I guess that was both his humor and his self-deprecation.

(Posted by Joshua Patty '99 on www.wabash.edu/news on Dec. 3, 2008)

Several times, introducing me to a church group, a well-meaning person has said, "Bill Placher is a theologian, but I think you'll find what he has to say very interesting."

(Introduction to *Essentials of Christian Theology*)

The dozens of postings to the College website in the past week have frequently recounted Bill's wry, gentle humor.

A classmate and I once remarked that we never saw Dr. Placher put gas in his car, and concluded that he must have simply willed it to run by the sheer force of his mind. On intellect alone, he would have had our respect and admiration. But Wabash men didn't only respect him – we loved him for his impish wit and gentle demeanor. In one Monon Bell Chapel, Dr. Placher drew gasps for conceding that Wabash and DePauw really weren't all that different. He then noted that most graduates of both schools couldn't read their own diplomas, and a few knowing chuckles rolled across the room. When he clinched the joke, saying with the signature twinkle in his eye, "Of course, ours are in Latin and theirs are in English," the Chapel nearly burst with the roars of delight.

(Posted by Jason W. Bennett '98)

[His] honesty was always tempered by his marvelous sense of humor. Several years ago, after a Monon Bell game, I saw him and joked that as I had just purchased several of his books, perhaps he might be willing to go back and change some of my grades. His reply, "I think I was more than generous the first time," made me love him all the more. (Posted by Carl Michaelis'79)

I was able to get away from the office for Chapel last Thursday morning. It was devoted to remembering Bill, and that wonderful hall was packed. Vic Powell recalled having Bill in Speech 1 as being "a very humbling experience – for ME!" After Bill's first three speeches – all earning an A+ and "Excellent!" -- Dr. Powell had a talk with Bill. He suggested that Bill bring a lighter touch to his next speech. That speech, "The Lawnmower as a Symbol of Class in Suburbia," also received an A+. Dr. Powell concluded his remarks with the observation that, "If you want eloquence, you go to the source."

Our own **David Blix** was the final speaker. He and Bill – "my oldest and closest friend" – had a friendship of 42 years. "A gift beyond measure," David said. His memories of Bill, "random and unbidden," included entertaining accounts of Bill wrestling **Tom Roberts** in Martindale, guarding the campus during Monon Bell week while armed with a baseball bat (Bill) and a broom (David), and the story of how they met, which I will share here. David was sitting in the lounge of Lilly Library, reading Sartre's "Existentialism and Human Emotions," and understanding barely a word of it, and panicking. "I looked up and there was someone else reading this book – a fellow sufferer – and at that moment he saw me, and he got up and came over. Now, he denied forever that he actually said this, but I'm sure my memory is right, that he greeted me with, 'Isn't this the stupidest thing you've ever read in your life?' Then he stuck out his hand and said, 'Hi, my name is Bill Placher.'"

Diane and I attended the memorial service in the Chapel last Saturday. Bill outlined this service himself. David Blix played the hymns Bill had selected. Hall Peebles, Bill's faculty advisor, gave the invocation, President White, Dean Phillips and Melissa Butler read scripture, and Rev. John Van Nuys '83 delivered the sermon. You can view a podcast of the memorial service on the Wabash [iTunesU website](#). The College has also posted on the iTunesU site a podcast of the Chapel service held December 4, as well as a number of Bill's speeches.

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I regret that I did not know Bill when I was an undergrad. I returned to Crawfordsville in 1974, Bill soon after, and we became acquainted over the years. Whenever Bill's name would come up in conversation, I was probably too eager to say, "Oh yeah, Bill and I were classmates – along with Blix and Bachner." But I was proud of Bill and proud of the association with three special men from the Class of '70 who have earned their places in Wabash lore.

A final indulgence: This fall I was spending some time in the garage, trying to figure out what all that stuff was in the boxes and bins that had accumulated over the years, with a view toward setting most of it on the curb. I found the box that had come from my parents' basement some years ago, after we sold the house I had grown up in. Among the items my Mom had saved was the Summer 1970 issue of *Old Wabash*, the predecessor of our current *Wabash Magazine*. The cover photograph shows us seated on the mall in our caps and gowns – I am actually front row and center, a position I generally avoided in classrooms. I laid it aside then, and eventually it reappeared on the coffee table a month ago. The issue features Bill's commencement address, "Some Thoughts of Hope in Time of War." I read and reread it in the last several weeks. Three of our classmates commented on Bill's passing in postings on the College website on December 1:

"His 1970 commencement address is even more poignant today than it was 38 years ago . . . his message is timeless." **Bob Pollom**

"I recall his commencement address not only for its insight into the world of that day but also for its impact on my father. I have revisited it on several occasions just to catch a glimpse into the brilliant mind of a young man mature beyond his years." **Mike Gregory**

"I find it almost impossible to think of a modern Wabash College without Bill Placher there as its heart and conscience. Bill was one of those upright pegs that holds down the world in even the strongest winds of change or controversy or confusion. I thought in 1970 that Bill's commencement address was

the finest and most appropriate to context talk I'd ever heard, and I think the same today, more than 38 years later." **Dan Simmons**

Here are the final sentences of the commencement address:

The class of 1970 does not enter a world full of nothing but glorious opportunities. But perhaps we'll learn that there are more things to admire in men than to despise; perhaps, knowing it will never be enough to change the world, we will act more honorably than we expected we would; perhaps we'll have a lot of fun along the way. It wouldn't be a bad life.



April 28, 1948 – November 30, 2008