

## DURAND DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI CREDIT THEIR TEACHERS AND SMALL-TOWN ROOTS

It's been said that it takes a village to raise a child, and quick to agree are this year's recipients of the Distinguished Alumni Awards sponsored by the Durand Educational Foundation.

Brenda Lovegrove Lepisto, Class of '73, and Brad Diller, Class of '74, will receive the awards on Sunday, Aug. 10, at Durand Union Station. A public reception will take place from 3:30-5:30 p.m.

"Being a Railroader afforded me opportunities to participate in so much," Diller said. "Had I grown up 20 minutes east in Flint, I would have been lost in the shuffle and those opportunities would not have been within my reach."

Lepisto said that growing up in a small town "positively impacted my career choices, success, and life as a whole." She noted that she felt fortunate to be a part of a supportive educational, family and community environment.

"Whenever I faced a challenge – an academic puzzle, a personal concern, or a challenging assignment – my teachers consistently made time for me," she said. "Their willingness to invest in my growth taught me the value of mentorship, patience, and perseverance."

A teacher and administrator for many years, Diller said he often reflected on his Durand teachers.

"In conversations with faculty and staff at Kelly Walsh, I talked many times about the teachers, coaches, and mentors from my days in Durand, how they did things, and how I wish they could have worked with us in Casper," he said.

Lepisto and Diller gave the same response to a question about their most influential teacher: Peg Chaney, who was the English Department chair and a teacher at Durand for 36 years.

"Mrs. Chaney inspired me to work hard," Lepisto said. "I think I took every course she taught, including expository writing and Latin. I thrived on the challenge, her evaluation of my work, and then reaching higher standards with the next opportunity. Fact: I bought the texts she assigned, and I still have them!"

Diller recalled a moment with Mrs. Chaney that profoundly affected his future path.

"I was a very creative punctuator," he said. "Every few words or so, I would just throw in commas or apostrophes. Late in my senior year, she was returning an essay and mine was a bloodbath – red everywhere! She leaned over and said, 'Brad, you are a very good writer. But when you get to college, they will crucify you for your punctuation.' That was the first time I just knew I was going to college. Not if, or maybe, or might. It was her use of the word 'when,' as if it was certain that I was going."

Lepisto also mentioned several other influencers from her high school years: Shirley Root, Barbara Koczman and Kim Nelson, her basketball and cheerleading coaches, who invested time and effort in teaching her physical skills and teamwork; Rick Green and Bill Herrmann, whose social studies classes enlarged her view of the cultural, sociological and historical aspects of the world; John Bombyk, ("the first and only person who taught me that yes, indeed, a type of mathematics exists in which I excel"); and John Gehring, whose advanced biology class she loved.

"Who knew that classifying insects caught in bogs, streams, ponds, and rivers would be so engrossing?" she said. "Biology stimulated my thinking about physiology, animal behavior, habitat, and medicine. The combination of arts and science courses fed my curiosity in human and animal brain and behavior development."

Lepisto added that she developed leadership and communication skills from school activities, and working on teams represents a large portion of her current work environment.

Diller said his strengths are in language arts and humanities, and "God bless the math and

science teachers for carrying me.” Helping out in Ted Raatikka’s special ed classes stirred his interest in becoming a special ed teacher himself.

“Rick Green hooked us up with the Michigan School for the Deaf and we gave them our prom decorations for their dance,” he said. “That was a real eye-opener, too.” He also mentioned several of his football, basketball, and baseball coaches as influential, including Lloyd Lamphere, Frank Davis, Conlin Smith, Bill Herrmann, and Tony Hill.

“I was not a great athlete, but they took care of me and coached me hard,” he said. “I was part of a team and made lasting friendships due to those connections. I also sang in Tom Dorey’s choir, although he paid me to lip sync. And Pete Fortunato, the middle school counselor, was a blessing.”

He fondly recalls Margaret Snyder, his first-grade teacher at Bertha Neal Elementary School.

“I remember her promoting me to the top reading group,” he said. “She kissed my cheek, and that was when my forever love of reading began!”

In addition to school and school-related activities, both Lepisto and Diller mentioned the influence of their families and the community.

“Growing up in a rural community, I spent more time in nature than with others,” Lepisto said. “I developed a love of the outdoors, nature, creatures, and weather changes. My parents fostered my interest in nature and we continue to enjoy this love. Whenever I feel tired and stressed from working, I head outdoors to appreciate nature, take time to hear my own thoughts, and enjoy the imagination and creativity that naturally develop.”

Diller also credits his family and the Durand community for their role in his life.

“My family was my earliest and most important influence and remain important to this day,” he said. “The whole Warren family was the best. Uncle Jerry, Aunt Margie, and my cousins were always a part of our family. Our neighbors – the Nimphies, Behnkes, and Sleepers – were truly family. And while Tony and Annette Hill didn’t live on our block, I consider them family, too. My childhood was perhaps the best in the history of neighborhoods. Also, Fr. Frank Hay was a man before his time who impacted me greatly.”

Lepisto summed up her school, family, and community influences.

“I continue to honor them by using the talents, skills and values they nurtured in those early years,” she said. “The lessons I gained from growing up in Durand continue to shape my decisions and drive my commitment to meaningful work, love, and play.”

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