

# To Charles Backstrom from his son Paul

2/16/1997

I should be able to share highlights of Dad's entire career at the U of M, since he was there for 37 years and I'll turn 38 next month. But I hope you'll understand if I start a little later.

I do remember his office on the East Bank, before they built the Social Science tower. Sometimes Mom would bundle whichever of us was born at the time into the car to pick him up, and I'd run up to his office to get him while they waited. Then it was a big deal when he moved to his new office. Now when I went in, I carried a little yellow stool, His office was on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, and I needed the stool to reach the elevator button.

We were friends with a Dutch family down the block, and one time my friend Mark asked his father a question. "You vil haf to ask Paul's fazer who is a pghrofessor of political science," he said. "I haf no idea." It was an early hint that being a Professor wasn't completely ordinary.

In the post-industrial social model, parents disappear for the day and the rest of the family has no real concept of what they do. Some parents compensate by bringing work home, others by taking their kids to the office on a Saturday. Dad overcame the barrier by hiring us to help him, at young ages. First came potty training, then came keypunching and data coding. A colleague once asked him if he paid us minimum wage. "It's pretty minimum, all right," he said. But once in a while we got a carton of chocolate milk as a bonus.

As always with him, everything was a learning experience. I can probably still read a punch card even if there's no printing on it, and sort cards starting with the least significant digit. Useless knowledge in today's computer age? I don't think so. He taught us how to find something interesting in even mundane tasks.

And it's not every parent that would take their kid to the office, show them where the confetti bin was underneath the card machines, and then tell us with a little grin how terribly hard it was to sweep up. "Chad," it was called, not confetti. The proper terminology was important to the learning experience.

If you or your kids or your parents took his class at certain times, one of us may have corrected your test. Don't worry, I'm sure it was after we knew our ABC's, and probably our numbers, too. We learned from that job things we never would have thought of, like how some people filled in all four circles so that when you put the template on, it looked like they had filled in the correct answer. Pretty sneaky, but thanks to Dad's teaching, we nailed 'em every time.

We weren't above giving him advice, either. One time he told us about a student who complained about her grade. "I'm not a B student," she said. Claudia didn't miss a beat: "You should have said, 'You are now!'"

Dad's work kept him, and by extension, us, up to date with the latest technology. I remember the hand-cranked adding machine he brought home one time, and then the tremendously heavy four-function mechanical calculator. Then going to the office where, under high security, was a desktop Wang calculator that added numbers with hardly any noise at all.

At the Carter-Mondale headquarters in Minneapolis on election night, the computers went down. Everybody else thought they were out of luck, but Dad pulled out his pocket calculator and got to work, and kept the news flowing, bad as it was for their camp. Carter and Mondale heard about it and each one called him on the phone after the election to thank him. There are different views of what doing things by hand means. To people there, he did it all by hand. To him with his calculator, he was only a technology or two behind. But I still think the adding machine was the most fun.

We're celebrating Dad's retirement from the University, but we know Dad will never retire from being a teacher, one who has interesting experiences, shares them with others, and adds his own perspective to make it more interesting, more memorable, and more valuable. But if you ever need a card punched or a test corrected, he just might choose to do something else instead. Don't worry, he's trained us well. We can handle the job.