

MINNESOTA YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT AWARD

Hilton Hotel and Towers, Minneapolis, MN
January 12, 2000

Charles H. Backstrom

Thank you so much for this award.

The nicest thing that can happen to anyone is to have someone come along and establish an award for what you have been trying to do for a long time.

The award is even more appreciated because of the way it is decided. The real honoree tonight is Ann Wynia for showing immense competence and breadth of concern across 2/3 of the branches of government over her lifetime of public service. And she brought her students along for the ride. Ann identified us as her mentors, and I at least wasn't even aware of helping her. But I am honored that she thinks I somehow did. The expression we use in our household is "You never know where your shadow falls."

And to be in the company of my colleagues John Turner and Virginia Gray is a special pleasure. The University is a great institution, but the strength of social institutions depends on a delicate web of human interactions. The University was seriously endangered the last few years by a series of misguided reform efforts, as well as inadequate leadership searches. They are being cited for other virtues tonight, but take it from me that you are seeing in these honorees two of the very few people whose heroic efforts saved the University.

But back to the program of the University that I have been involved with – internships. Having a first rate internship program in Minnesota is (of course) not surprising.

When I came to the University of Minnesota to run the field work and internships, I could see the difference from other states where the colleges were trying to prevent politicians from speaking on campus, and to keep students on campus away from politicians.

In this state, the academics and the leaders of our first rate political parties realized that the opposite was true: Immerse students in a situation where they deal with the actual public issue being handled by real politicians. Students will learn how to be effective, and thus will want to join in the process.

This recruitment of young people to replenish leadership is essential to a democracy.

As the millennium approached, I tried to look at all the evaluations of past achievements I could find. I was searching for what I believe is the major happening or movement of the millennium. (I admit I never saw all the lists), but never once did I find any mention of what I consider the most important trend of the last thousand years.

It is the utter triumph of democracy as an ideal, and the achievement of democracy by far more people on Earth than ever before.

Democracy is America's finest export; It may well be the only export with a favorable balance of trade, because people in other countries are seeing it here and buying into it.

Democracy is an item of faith to more people on Earth than any major religion; People sacrifice to try to get it, like the young Chinese who stood in front of the tank guns in Tianamin Square.

The peoples of eastern Europe were pressing for democracy also, so when their economies crashed, they installed voting. Virtually 100% took part in their first democratic election of their leaders.

The ideal of democracy is easy to state, but hard to achieve in practice. Under the former authoritative and totalitarian regimes, these countries weren't allowed to have any private groups or local government where people could experience collective decision making. So they had no new leaders trained by practicing democracy in smaller areas to ready them for big nation service. It is not surprising there have been many slips and backsliding.

But democracy is still recognized everywhere as being better than every other kind of government.

Unfortunately, there is one blatant exception to this faith in democracy. One major country does not believe in democracy very much. In that country,

- Fewer than half of its citizens vote.
- People – especially young people – are cynical about their chance of affecting policy results.
- The media feeds this cynicism by focusing on private scandal rather than examining the candidates' capacity for leadership.
- Fewer people want to run for office.
- The press reports politics like a horserace, not the serious matter of choosing officials to govern.

Where (you may ask) is this terrible place where democracy is not valued and worked at?

You got it – the good old U S of A.

This is the saddest turn of affairs at the end of a glorious millennium of democratic advance.

The only hope for this country is that organization's like the YMCA's Youth in Government will continue to grow, enabling more youth to find out how to operate it. In this program you also come to see that the people now working in government are for the most part competent, dedicated, and honorable – like Ann Wynia. And you may be a part of rebirth of what was once the widely-held belief in Minnesota more than anywhere else that public service is the most honorable career a young person can aspire to follow.

Then you will turn this anti-democracy attitude around, and our country will once again be able to export the proof that democracy works.

Thank you very much for doing this great service, for coming here this evening, and for recognizing those of us who have tried to help out.



Minnesota YMCA Youth in Government
2000 Zwach-Eddy Crystal Dome Award
Recipient

CHARLES BACKSTROM
Shoreview, Minnesota

Charles Backstrom was born in 1926 and attended Moorhead State University (Minnesota) where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1949. Mr. Backstrom and his wife Barbara have four adult children.

Mr. Backstrom served in active duty in the United States Army from 1944 to 1947. He served in the active Reserve from 1947-1963, achieving the rank of Captain. He attended the University of Wisconsin, where he earned a Master of Arts degree in 1953 and a Doctorate degree in 1956, majoring in political science and minoring in economics.

Professor Backstrom received Congressional Fellowship from the American Political Science Association in 1957, serving with Rep. Carl Elliott and Sen. Hubert Humphrey. He was a legislative assistant for Rep. Carl Elliott of Alabama in 1958-1959. Mr. Backstrom held an assistant professor of political science position at the University of Minnesota from 1959-1963, an associate professor position from 1963-1970, and a professor position from 1970-1996. He was also an adjunct professor for the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs from 1970-1985. Professor Backstrom has been a Professor Emeritus since 1997.

Over the course of an academic career that spans six decades, Charles Backstrom has distinguished himself in the fields of political science education, election law, reapportionment, and politics and policy of AIDS. Mr. Backstrom is an experienced elections consultant, currently serving that role for the Minneapolis Star Tribune and for CBS News. He has served on numerous boards, committees and task forces at the U of M.

Charles Backstrom is a published author, having co-written books, contributed chapters to books, written monographs and various articles, and co-produced a film on lawmakers. Professor Backstrom has received numerous honors for his academic and political achievements.