
U-HIGH MIDWAY

Wayne of a kind

*Fifty-one years later,
retiring adviser leaves
publications thriving*

By Mike Glick
Editor-in-Chief

No office. No budget.

When journalism adviser Wayne Brasler arrived at U-High in 1964 to start a journalism program, he began with nothing. He set out to make the program a fixture at U-High despite having had little previous teaching experience.

He quickly made his presence felt.

'Mr. Brasler lives for high schools'

Nearly every conversation with Mr. Brasler involves Normandy, the Missouri town where he grew up. The place affected him so tremendously that he just can't help it. Citing the transformations he underwent at Normandy High School, Mr. Brasler suggested that those experiences gave him an early appreciation of the importance of high school.

Mr. Brasler's passion for high school life has fascinated members of the Midway and U-Highlights staffs throughout his 51 years at U-High.

"It's amazing how much Mr. Brasler cares about this high school paper and how much he cares about his high school," Duncan Weinstein, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2012-2013 and a current student at Brown University, said. "It's very genuine. Mr. Brasler lives for high schools.

"He actually recognizes the amount of work that we put in. He always keeps the office stocked with food and soda and puts people up for IJEA journalist of the year. He never consciously



thanks you for your efforts, but he recognizes that we sacrifice a lot because we care. And obviously he cares a lot, too."

Still able to recount the Homecoming kings and queens at Normandy, Mr. Brasler had a well-rounded high school experience that shaped him for life. According to Monica Davey, an Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 1981-1982 and now the Chicago Bureau Chief for the New York Times, Mr. Brasler's zest for life proved a constant of his character.

"I found him fascinating," Ms. Davey said. "So many teachers, they learn about you but you don't really get to know much about them. His interest in tornadoes, the Normandy Courier and Motown music, all of those things fascinated me as a student. I felt like he was a real person with real interests.

"He was just so interested in everything. It's the perfect example of a working journalist. Watching him sing, it just made us all laugh. He

would do characters and do voices, and his whole explanation of Normandy and the kings and queens, that always struck me. This is a guy who really takes life in."

The boss

Every one of Mr. Brasler's students has stood beside his desk, trembling in fear as he flipped over the cover sheet to the first page of their copy.

"Mr. Brasler was in a way our manager," Rachel Sylora, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2010-2011 and a senior at the University of Michigan, said. "A manager should scare you a little bit but he should also push you further than you think you can go. That's the kind of person you want to work for."

Generating a reaction from Mr. Brasler takes little effort.

"The immediate image that comes to mind is walking in to show him my story and him reading the first three words and throwing it on the ground, with sixty different drafts behind that

first slug,” JR Reed, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2011-2012 and a junior at Yale University, said. “Unlike any other professor or any other person at Lab, he told it like it was.”

For some, including Marissa Page, Ed-

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– Marissa Page

itor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2013-2014 and a freshman at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, Mr. Brasler’s candidness proved especially difficult to stomach.

“In journalism, you have to understand how to take criticism,” Marissa said. “One issue, I had a tiny news brief on Faculty Development Day, and I actually did 13 rewrites. Every copy I turned in, Mr. Brasler railed me. With one of my rewrites, he picked up the copy and threw it at me. I broke down in the office, and he came back to me and said, ‘This is no place for tears.’”

“But I realized that that was a good thing. That night when I rewrote a 250-word brief so many times I can’t even fathom, it really taught me that I wasn’t that great at journalism. You’re never going to be a perfect journalist. You have to constantly correct yourself. No one is going to hold your hand. Mr. Brasler does not hold back, and that’s the best way to learn.”

The few times Mr. Brasler offered praise, journalists knew it sincere.

“His tough critiques are hard to take sometimes, and they can be very painful,” Ms. Davey said. “You just don’t want to disappoint the guy. But when you hit the right notes, you can really trust that what he’s saying about your work is true. It felt like a million dollars when he liked your story, even though that was rare.”

The advocate

For years, Mr. Brasler has shown his journalism classes the film *Shat-*

tered Glass, in which Stephen Glass, a reporter for the New Republic, makes the fatal mistake of evading the truth in his stories. His first editor, Michael Kelly, stands by him, as he knows that any error is the entire publication’s responsibility. After Glass’ boss fires Kelly, Chuck Lane assumes Kelly’s editing role. Unlike Kelly, unlike Mr. Brasler, Lane leaves Glass out to dry.

“My sophomore year, I committed a terrible error in a story that went to print on a major story on drunk driving,” Gabe Bump, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2008-2009 and a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, said. “It was a complete disaster. I was really distraught. I remember going up to meet with Mr. Brasler in private and telling him, ‘I can’t do this. This isn’t for me. I don’t want to be on the staff anymore.’”

“And he just laughed at me. Just laughed at my face. He wouldn’t let me do it. He refused to do it. That wasn’t the last time I messed something up. Mistakes happen. Sometimes they’re caught before it goes to press, but sometimes they aren’t. Mr. Brasler cared about me and he cared about the staff. Knowing that was really important. That really struck me about him. He’s a people person, and that makes a good editor. Mr. Brasler is very much a writer’s editor. He sticks by people.”

Mr. Brasler not only provided a backbone for journalists in the office, but also in their personal lives. For Jim Reginato, Editor-in-Chief of the yearbook in the late 1970s and now a writer for Vanity Fair, this proved especially important.

“For me, I was in the Beverly neighborhood, which is a bit of a ways from Hyde Park, and on many occasions Mr. Brasler would drive me home to Beverly,” Mr. Reginato said. “He went above and beyond the call of duty. He was always there for all of us.”

The man of standards

At fourteen or fifteen years old, most beginning journalists lack formal work experience. Immediately, Mr. Brasler separated journalism classes from core academic classes and established a professional environment in the office.

“One of the key things he says is that you’re a journalist, not a journalism student,” Duncan said. “When I started out, that was terrifying. With class papers, if you screw something up, there’s no stake in it. But if you screw something up in the Midway, there’s a level of accountability.”

Matt Luchins, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2009-2010 and a graduate of the University of Chicago, believes Mr. Brasler helped him and many other students come of age.

“Everybody comes into high school a bit naïve,” Matt said. “You’re young. A lot of the things you can get away with in certain academic courses you can’t when you’re working on the newspaper with the way Mr. Brasler wanted things done. You grow up very quickly in that respect.”

“Because of Mr. Brasler, I’ll never use prepositions, never use ‘to-be’ verbs and I’ll never settle for mediocrity. You can get a B in a class, but if you write a B story on the newspaper that isn’t going to cut it for you and the staff.”

Editors understood that the Midway served a pivotal role at U-High, representing the school with each story, said Sydney Scarlata, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2010-2012 and a junior at Reed College.

“With the newspaper, your writing represents you and your advisor and the staff,” Sydney said. “We were the voice of the school in a way. We were the ones who shaped how people viewed our school. That was really important. Deadline nights highlighted that. We stayed there until we got the

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story right. We put out the most accurate version of events in our community that we could.”

According to Nick Chaskin, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2009-2011, Mr. Brasler’s professionalism proved refreshing to many U-Highers.

“He held everyone to a professional standard,” Nick said. “When you’re being patronized as a high schooler, it can really bring the best out of people who aren’t excelling otherwise. He

definitely motivated a group of people more than I've seen anyone else do. He put in so many hours, and he did it happily.

"We sacrificed our GPAs for the Midway, and he convinced us it was worth it, which it was. He helped us develop past what would be expected of our age."

The friend

The difference between a fourteen-year old and a seventeen-year old seems minimal, only three years. Yet, as students continually met the expectations that Mr. Brasler set, they came to find Mr. Brasler both a superior and a peer.

"When I became an editor-in-chief my junior year, he pulled me and Rachel Sylora and Rafi Khan aside and said, 'Okay, you're editors-in-chief now, so you have to call me Wayne,' Sydney said. "He showed us the same respect that he showed to other teachers. We were no longer subordinate to him and working under him but working with him. He truly respected me as I respected him.

"He would consistently call us into his little cubby in the office to watch series of YouTube videos or music videos," Sydney said. "He loved us. We were his family I think. The staff was his family.

"He wanted to share his life with us because he wanted it to become part of our lives, and he wanted our lives to become part of his life. Initially I was annoyed by getting called out to talk to him, but I quickly came to enjoy those interactions. They were special."

The transformer

When Jeremy Woo joined the Midway staff at the end of his junior year, he'd

never thought about pursuing a career in journalism. Within months of joining the staff, however, his life plans shifted. He quickly rose to the ranks of Editor-in-Chief and decided to apply to and eventually enroll at the Medill School of Journalism.

"If you had told me at any point in high school that I would be writing for Sports Illustrated right now, I don't know what I would have said," Jer-

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— Nick Chaskin

emy said. "It's pretty crazy. Without the Midway, I wouldn't have gone into journalism. Mr. Brasler is the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing. If he hadn't been such a positive force for me, applying to schools would have been a much different process."

Mr. Brasler has produced hundreds of future media professionals, and most of them say they still feel his impact today.

"We're typically supposed to work nine to five at my current internship," Rachel said. "For me, it's not even expected. I just want to get the work done. That was distilled in me at the Midway. It makes you more ambitious because you know it'll pay off in the long run.

"I've been able to apply that to everything I do. It's a team effort and you do whatever it takes to get it done."

The 'huge personality'

Comical. Dramatic. Blunt. Never one to mince words, Mr. Brasler effectively kept his staffs on task while also fostering a lively atmosphere, singing his favorite songs and passionately voicing his opinions. Even on deadline nights, when the

staffs stayed in the office until dawn of the next morning, Mr. Brasler remained upbeat.

"Mr. Brasler made me more open to special teachers, in the best sense of the word special," William Chung, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2012-2013 and currently a sophomore at the Naval Academy, said. "It was interesting to work around such a huge personality. It helped me adapt more easily to any situation. I've never really met someone like him."

Despite personal setbacks and a busy life outside of the journalism office, Mr. Brasler always maintained full focus on the Midway and yearbook.

"He nearly went blind in one eye at some point during my four years," Matt said. "He was gone for a few days and it wasn't clear what was going to happen afterwards. What was amazing was when he came back he was no different. He talked about it, and he has this particular face when he talks about his health, with a smile. He almost lost his vision and was able to come back and talk about it for ten minutes and then it was back to the paper, making sure quotes were checked and 'to-be' verbs gone, with more than a few jokes here and there."

The adviser

Journalism classes don't have the same feel as a math or history or science course at U-High. Mr. Brasler did not believe in finding the "right" answer. He encouraged his staffs to come together in search of every answer, working with one another throughout the process.

"Mr. Brasler trained the staff to train the staff," Nick Chaskin said. "It was a chain of mentors. I was mentored by Gabe Bump and Sydney did a lot of stuff with me. It required a lot of time but you don't get that any other place.

"I can speak for more than just myself in saying that Mr. Brasler was great at taking kids who were incredibly intelligent but who did not do as well in the



classroom and making us do well. It was more of a job than a class. A lot of people excelled that you wouldn't have expected to excel to that degree. I was definitely one of those cases. I performed a lot better in the journalism office than I did in the classroom."

Nick Phalen, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2011-2012 and now a junior at Georgetown University, felt Mr. Brasler's teaching methods proved particularly effective.

"One of the things about Mr. Brasler's teaching style is that he doesn't teach that much," Nick Phalen said. "He more throws you in the fire and makes you learn on the job. A lot of that learning comes from what the editors teach you. The majority of stuff I learned wasn't straight from Mr. Brasler's mouth or what I wrote down in my notebook. It was from people ahead of me. But Mr. Brasler fostered that."

Despite his frequent harsh criticisms, Mr. Brasler always encouraged students to pursue topics that mattered to them.

"He told us what he found important but encouraged us to find things that we found very important," Sydney said. "He read from the daily newspapers to high-

me his passion for certain fundamental issues and allowed me to find my own passions in what I wanted to write about."

That encouragement to pursue any topic has extended throughout Mr. Brasler's tenure.

"He taught me to keep my eyes and ears open," Mr. Reginato said. "It's about

to his students.

"I'm sure other people will say this, too, but Mr. Brasler was really one of a kind," Isabella said. "He was old school and yet he kept up with what modern kids were doing in music and pop culture and books.

"It's going to be a big change, and one that everyone will really feel. He was

dad had always been telling me I should do it.

“He was old school and yet he kept up with what modern kids were doing.”

— Isabella Prenta

"But when Mr. Brasler talked about how they worked away even until four in the morning, I knew I had to do this program. That you could love something so much that you could do it all day and all night really impressed me. Mr. Brasler really impressed me."



“It's amazing how fun he could be. We learned as much as we laughed.”

— Jim Reginato

light these issues and tried to show us that we should care about them. He showed

listening to people when you were interviewing them, and letting the subject talk as much as possible. To me it's about capturing someone's voice. That's one of the exciting things about writing and journalism. He just instilled in us excitement for language. You always have to question everything and not take anything at face value. He made the fundamentals so much fun. It's amazing how fun he could be. We learned as much as we laughed in his room."

Isabella Prenta, Editor-in-Chief of U-Highlights from 2009-2010 and a graduate of the University of Illinois, says Mr. Brasler's personable nature allowed the connections that endeared him

a powerful and devoted leader. There are only a handful of words to describe Mr. Brasler, but he more than anything was devoted. He was such a leader that you had no problem doing what he asked of you."

Sonia Bourdaghs, Editor-in-Chief of the Midway from 2012-2014 and a freshman at Tufts University, says Mr. Brasler's passion for his job instantly drew her attention and admiration.

"Mr. Brasler taught me how to be proud of a product," Sonia said. "When you're on the Midway or yearbook, you learn how to take pride in your work.

"Before high school started, I had no intention of doing journalism even though my

Editor's Note



Mike

When I asked if Mr. Brasler would allow us to write a feature

on his retirement, he refused. He saw it as a conflict of interest and believed we should only report the news.

The Midway editors and alumni still wanted to express our gratitude to Mr. Brasler and felt this feature should supplement the news, so we produced it without Mr. Brasler's knowledge. The administration and printer both agreed to the story's publication.

U-High graduates Catherine Braendel and Marissa Page joined together to provide and crop all photography.