

A Tribute to Dr. Betty van der Smissen^{*}

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Dr. Betty van der Smissen passed away November 6, 2008 at the age of 81. Her lifetime of work spanned over 50 years. Betty meant a great deal to many people around the country who sent their sentiments to me in various emails after she died. I will start with my own.

Betty van der Smissen – small v, small d, capital S, her name and its correct spelling were important to her, a reflection of her Midwestern roots and family values. She was a frugal person. Some of her habits later in life reflected the dust bowl and the depression in which she grew up. When she relocated, she moved paper cups and paper plates and used tin foil. More than once she moved a 32 oz plastic McDonalds cup which she used even up to the week she died - it was an Olympic edition, reflecting her love of sport and competition. She used paper towels and dried them on the sink to be used again. If we sent something over in a zip lock bag, the zip lock bag was returned. She loved her tea, the secret is to get it hot enough, 2 minutes, and she would dip the tea bag 5 times and would use it 2 times, and sometimes she would proudly get 3 cups out of it. But while she was frugal, she was also generous. I watched her sit and write a pile of checks - about 50 - one Christmas to charities, something she did twice a year, giving away literally thousands of dollars.

She was an avid sports fan. We asked her to go with us somewhere one day but the Jay Hawks were playing. She watched football, basketball, tennis, golf, and sometimes baseball. She got three newspapers everyday; *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Democrat Gazette*, all of which she usually read. But of course, the sports section was read first, always checking how her universities did. She taught at six universities including Iowa, Penn State, Bowling Green, Michigan State, Northern Iowa and finally Arkansas. She loved her students and her work. She missed only one class before she died on a Thursday. I told her I would teach her class the Monday before and she

^{*} Professor Moiseichik originally presented this tribute on March 6, 2009, during the Sport & Recreation Law Association's 22nd Annual Conference on Sport, Physical Activity, Recreation and Law, in San Antonio, Texas.

looked at me and said, "this is just temporary, let them know I will be back next week."

She expected everyone to stay abreast of everything. But this was also a problem for her. She was working on a second edition of her law book and she wanted to make sure it had all the cases, but every day new cases came out and so she had a problem bringing it to a conclusion. She never expected anything of someone else that she did not do herself.

She loved flowers, chocolate, black licorice, and going out to dinner. She loved nature and pictures and had more pictures than she had wall space. She collected owls and people bought them for her giving her 100s in her collection, all quite unique. She loved giving, if you said you liked something, she never forgot it.

Many of the following statements from people who knew her, were experiences and sentiments I share:

Carol Riddick, Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Betty van der Smissen literally touched the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of students and colleagues. On the one hand, Betty was not a complicated person. She was religious, loved the out-of-doors, owls, her Universities, watching her favorite colleges play ball on television, a good cup of tea, and cook outs. Betty also put a premium on deliberate, logical, and informed thought to guide our professional exchanges and endeavors. She worked long hours and expected those working with her to do the same. If you gave her something to read and comment on, be prepared for it to come back "bleeding" with feedback.

On the other hand, Betty was a private and complex person. What perhaps many people didn't know or appreciate about Betty was her commitment to students. In particular, Betty loved meeting and working with graduate students. As ill as she was these past couple of years, she wanted to remain in the class room. Indeed, she opted to teach this semester, telling me a few months ago she still "had something left to teach." Walking through her professional library (housed in a climate controlled, three car garage) this past January, she stopped to show me copies of the over 100 theses and dissertations she had chaired. She spent about 20 minutes, standing up in obvious pain, proudly talking about some of the topics of these research endeavors.

Betty was also a compassionate person. My second semester into the doctorate program, my husband and I discovered we didn't have enough money to live on. I cannot remember how Betty found this out, but I do clearly remember her reaching for her clutch wallet and writing me a check. She asked how much I needed to cover expenses and I remember muttering something along the lines of maybe a "\$100 or \$200." She handed a check payable to me, signed it, yet hadn't recorded any dollar amount. When I pointed out this omission, she told me to think about how much I really needed, making sure I "borrowed" enough.

Karla Henderson, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC

I gave my first formal presentation and just about died when I saw Betty sitting in the audience. She was also about to be the incoming president of ACA. She clearly was an important person. Anyway, the presentation went OK, but later that day she tapped me on the shoulder. She shook my hand and said, "I wanted to tell you that I enjoyed your presentation. My name is Betty van der Smissen. . ." I was so impressed with her humility—of course I knew who Betty van der Smissen was and she didn't have to introduce herself, but she did. I never forgot that gesture and did learn a great lesson about humility.

JoAnn Eickhoff-Shemek, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida

I will never forget the first time I personally met Betty. She was invited to come to the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNOmaha) as a Distinguished Lecturer in the late 1980s. It was such an honor to finally meet her and I was so inspired by all of her wonderful presentations that she gave to our faculty members and students. At that time, I was beginning to have a real interest in legal issues, but her visit convinced me that this was an area I wanted to learn much more about.

Shortly thereafter, I began my Ph.D. which included taking several law classes in the Law College at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. My dissertation focused on published standards of practice – one of many areas that Betty had a great deal of expertise and interest in. I recall many wonderful conversations with Betty over the years on the topic of standards. I learned so much from her and I very much valued her support of my work. I will miss these conversations and

her friendship immensely. The best way for me to honor Betty and her many extraordinary contributions is to continue sharing everything I have learned from her with the many health/fitness professionals and students I come in contact with as an educator in this area.

Tassos Kaburakis, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, IL

It was my first SRLA conference, early 2000s. I ran into Betty at the same gate at the airport on our way back. She was kind enough to spend some time and talk. The saying goes "people will forget what you said, forget what you did, they won't forget how you made them feel. . ." So, it was the kindness in her eyes, her thoughtful discussion, approach to work and research, and her punchline "you young colleagues have so much to offer to our field" that was inspiring and a challenge for good work ahead. I will always remember her, her challenge and demand of us all to think outside the box, to develop solid theory for the good of all people, and make this a better and safer place for our children and their children.

Jean Hughes, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR

When you were presenting at a conference, you would hope that Betty would choose to attend your session, but then when she did, you were terrified. My proudest moment was when Betty heard my session on extreme sports and requested to present with me at a future conference and expand it.

Gaylene Carpenter, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR

My special recollection of her was from an accreditation site visit she did with us at the University of Georgia about 15 years ago. She was a "formidable" person, and even a little intimidating if the truth be known; but in spite of many flaws in our program at the time, she was thoughtful, generous and encouraging. . . .and THOROUGH! I was sure she would miss her Atlanta plane when she persisted with the review up until just a little more than two hours before she was due to take off. Athens to Atlanta by car is an hour and 45 minutes on a good day and she had a rental car to return. So I asked her if she wanted to try to make alternative arrangements, but she said, with characteristic confidence and determination, "Oh, I'll make it." And she did.

Edwin Gomez, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Betty challenged you to go beyond your comfort level, and that publication for the sake of publication (e.g., quantity over quality) is a frivolous endeavor (her words), she said, so write when you feel a need to contribute.

Jim Moss, a fellow outdoor attorney

Each discussion, each conversation, each time I spent with her was educational and fantastic. Each discussion made me work hard and with a great big grin on my face because I knew she enjoyed the discussions also.

We owe her a big Thank You for her work, her dedication, her devotion to her students, her friends and her discipline.

Dan Ferguson, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS

Betty may no longer be with us but her influence on our profession will be felt for generations to come and her influence will no doubt affect the lives of millions of Americans in a positive way. No one can deny she loved her profession and gave her all to advance it.

*Rita Yerkes, Aurora University, Aurora, IL, and the Association
Eeperiential Education*

Betty was an icon, mentor and friend. She changed all of us by her devotion and brilliant intellect. But most of all she was a model of "servant leadership" that made a difference in the lives of others. I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to learn from her, work with her and laugh with her. She was a beacon on the hill that one could always count on to stand for ethics and caring.

In closing, Betty was brilliant, insightful, caring, and committed. She made significant contributions to the recreation profession over her lifetime. Rest in peace, Dr. van der Smissen.

AEE VAN DER SMISSEN RESEARCH ENDOWMENT

The van der Smissen Research Endowment has been created by the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) to "continue Dr. van der Smissen's support of and to further research related to outdoor benefits" because "[q]uality outdoor programming that makes a difference in the lives of children and adults rests with our ability to assess and validate its benefits through research." Further information on contributing to the van der Smissen Research Endowment fund can be found online at http://www.aee.org/files/en/user/cms/van_der_Smissen_Pamphlet_final.pdf.