

***A HOWE'S NOW* INTERVIEW WITH BILL ENGLISH**

Interviewed by Mike Bina, Maryland School for the Blind, with the helpful assistance of Burt Boyer, American Printing House for the Blind, and Betsy Forester, daughter of Bill and Janet English.



During the spring of 2012 Bill English agreed to be interviewed for *Howe's Now*. For a man who does not like the spotlight, it can't be divulged how his arm was successfully twisted.

Bill needs no introduction within the blindness field, and particularly within the circles of the Council of Schools and Services for the Blind (COSB). Those who know him are aware that he began his tenure as a teacher and coach at the Kentucky School in 1951 and in Ohio in 1955. He became the principal at the Virginia School in 1958 and superintendent in Wisconsin in 1969.

Most know that he is an inductee in the Leaders and Legends in Blindness Hall of Fame. He is also an AFB Miguel Medal honoree and AER Mary K. Bauman awardee. And of course, we know COSB named its highest award in his honor—the Bill

English Leadership Award— and selected him as the first recipient. But there is more to the man than his awards. They do not fully define him.

The purpose of this interview is to introduce him to those who are new to the field and— for those who know him—to provide another dimension of his significance.

Whenever I read the quote, “A great man has the power to make any man feel small. But it is the truly great man who makes every man feel great,” I immediately think of Bill English.

When you try and isolate what it is about him that always makes you feel better after you interacted with him, many things come to mind. He is down to earth. Genuine. Optimist. Sincere. Certainly his warm and up-beat smile and his sense of humor can be added to the list.

Paramount of all the reasons, at the core of his ‘greatness,’ is his natural way of “putting it in neutral” and the person he is with “at ease.” When you are with him it is as if you are the most important person in the world. And to him, genuinely, you are. He is not a salesman selling something insincerely applying Dale Carnegie’s “Ways to influence people” techniques.

“Bill English, a father figure for so many, a role model for all who know him, a man of the highest integrity, a true leader and legend in the field of blindness, a real friend, and a man you know you can trust with your life— truly one of a kind.”

--Burt Boyer

All who worked with him felt he was their cheer 'leader.' He was always quick to direct credit one's way and felt pride in what others accomplished.



In the interview, Bill expressed gratitude for the opportunity to lead and work with outstanding professional colleagues. He continues to be a mentor, champion and a cheerleader for our field's current leaders. Pictured above, Bill always exuded a joy in everything he did— sometimes in spite of the inevitable frustrations that come with "earning the big bucks."

As you read his interview responses, hopefully you will see what is at his core that made him so unique among our field's leaders. You will see he highly respected and valued students, parents, staff at every level in the school and particularly our schools for the opportunities they provide our students.

Thinking back to him as a superintendent, it was clear he loved what he did. And, he was clearly joyful doing it—not to say he did not get frustrated. But even in spite of all the challenges he faced, he always said what a privilege it was to work in our schools and on behalf of "the kids," as he called them. These were not just verbalizations. He genuinely believed – and lived it.

Bill is now retired. He continues to fish. And fortunately for all of us in COSB— by his enduring example— he still leads.

1. How did you find the "field of education for blind kids" or did "it find you?"

It found me. When I was in high school in Chicago, I worked summers at a YMCA camp near Muskegon. One summer there were four young boys from Chicago who were blind. I worked with them in swimming and thought it was great. When I was in graduate school in Iowa, a professor of education at Cornell sent me a message to see him. When I met with him he said, "I have the perfect job for you" and indeed it was! The perfect job was being a teacher and coach at Kentucky School for the Blind where I was hired by Superintendent Paul Langan in 1951.

2. As you look back on your most impressive and rich career, who do you feel learned more— the kids you taught and administered programs for— or you?

I learned more from the kids than they learned from me. I know this for sure. And, what was exciting and inspiring for me, they taught me something every day. And of course, they sometimes "tested me" on what I learned. O boy, did they ever! Thinking back, it makes me smile. What a privilege it was working with them!

"I learned more from the kids than they learned from me. I know this for sure. And, what was exciting and inspiring for me, they taught me something every day. And of course, they sometimes "tested me" on what I learned.

--Bill English

3. What would you list as your proudest accomplishments in your career?

I am especially proud of the outreach programs that were established in Wisconsin that served so many kids through the Instructional Resource Center and by staff who travelled the state and provided low vision clinics, parent training, teacher in-service, and early childhood programs.

Second, I am very proud of the many outstanding employees I hired who were great teachers and became wonderful administrators. Many of them call me their mentor, but all I did was be their cheerleader. What a joy it was watching them grow and contribute.

I am also proud of my 1957 Ohio School for the Blind wrestling team that won the Columbus City Wrestling Tournament. What made their accomplishment especially gratifying was that it was against sighted kids. Another memory was teaching Elwood Miracle, a totally blind kid at the Kentucky School, to jump shoot a basketball.



Bill intensely awaits the arrival of supper at Duck Lake in northern Wisconsin where he frequently fished and sometimes caught. Bill and Janet spend the summers at Duck Lake in Antigo, Wisconsin. In the late fall and winters, they reside in Madison where Bill, an avid sport fanatic cheers his Wisconsin Badgers football, basketball and, if they had a team, Tiddly Winks.

I am also proud that at the Kentucky School I was able to get the equipment and set up the first science program. And at the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, we started the mobility program. At the Wisconsin School we were able to get the IRC, Primary Education Building, the Natatorium, the Center for the Arts, and track built. We were able to also build a garage for the school vehicles, which also provided a "classroom" for our auto body and small engine repair vocational education programs.

At Kentucky in our recreation program I had the first racial integration of students in the state. In the same vein, I was proud to be part of the first integration in competitive sports in the state when the Kentucky School hosted an Evansville, Indiana high school team that had African-American kids on their wrestling team. My, how the world has changed and for the good.

4. What would you list as your regrets or disappointments in your career that you wished had happened that you were pushing for?

I regret that the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) did not approve our proposal for a distance learning project to work with students who were visually handicapped in home districts. This would have been a win-win for everyone involved.

I always questioned why state lines were barriers. For example, kids in Illinois had to go all the way to Jacksonville when the school in Wisconsin was right across the border. Another example is that kids in northern Wisconsin had to go to Janesville instead of the Minnesota School being closer to them. Again, our proposals were not approved by the DPI. I was always an advocate to let kids cross state lines when it would be closer to their homes.

5. As a youngster growing up in Chicago, did you ever envision that you would years later be inducted into the Leaders and Legends in the Blindness Field Hall of Fame?

No way! It still shocks me now after the fact. How did a YMCA camp swimming teacher end up in the blindness-field Hall of Fame? That was never my goal.

"Care about the kids, really care about them. Speak pleasantly. Have high expectations for them, don't think that they can't do anything. Insist that students perform to their ability. Listen to what they have to say and what they think about things."

--Bill English

6. As a big baseball fan who loyally cheers for the Chicago Cubs in spite of their perennial record, do you still hold hope that they will win another World Series?

While the Cubs have won three World Series with the last one in 1908, of course, I am an eternal optimist. That is what is required of a Cubs fan. Just wait until next year. I have a good feeling about this year. I hope!

7. What advice would you give to young teachers, therapists, houseparents, and paraeducators?

Care about the kids— really care about them. Speak pleasantly. Have high expectations for them, never think that they can't do anything. Insist that students perform to their ability. Listen to what they have to say and what they think about things.

8. In addition to "pray a lot and often," what advice would you give principals, supervisors and superintendents?

Listen to your fellow staff members. Try to understand what they say and what they think is right. Don't be afraid to implement new ideas and programs.

Be open and kind to parents. Always respect their situation having to leave their child to return home. Also consider the child being upset, as well. Don't be autocratic-- you're not always right.

9. What are a couple of humorous incidents involving students?

Two stories still make me laugh to this day. The first one is when Mary Sue at the Kentucky School and a group of staff were leaving the building. After exiting, the nurse, Ms. Lindsay, turned and saw Mary Sue was coming out the door that was closing. Mrs. Lindsay said “watch the door Mary Sue.” As the group walked down the side walk, a high pitched voice called “How long do you want me to watch it, Mrs. Lindsay?”

The second humorous incident was when I was coaching wrestling at Kentucky. I always tried to fill the team with a wrestler in each weight class. We didn’t have a heavy weight. So we recruited Freddy, this pretty athletic kid.

At a Tennessee School tournament, I shook hands with Freddy as he went out on the mat. I turned and returned to my chair at the side of the mat ready for the match to start. As I looked up mat, there was Freddy off the mat right in front me. I asked him why he was already back. The Arkansas Superintendent, Max Wooley, came running over to tell me it only took 4.5 seconds for Freddy to be pinned. I didn’t even think Freddy could get to the floor that fast! Freddy did his best and was able to be part of the team, so he benefited. But I still laugh about it.

“Listen to your fellow staff members. Try to understand what they say and what they think is right. Don’t be afraid to implement new ideas and programs. Be open and kind to parents. Always respect their situation having to leave their child to return home. Consider the child being upset, as well. Don’t be autocratic—you are not always right!”

— Bill English

10. Do you think humor is an important element in a school setting?

YES! Humor is necessary to alleviate stressful situations. When you inject humor in the daily routine it calms the situation and it always helps. Sometimes humor is the only answer in certain stressful situations. Schools are fun places and sometimes we might get too serious.

11. What did you do to deal with the inevitable stress associated with school administration?

There’s a place called Duck Lake in Northern Wisconsin that was my escape! Fishing, boating, swimming, and doing things with my family. Of course, I am a Cubs fan and sports are a great escape.

I recall many humorous incidents when I was a superintendent and these always helped my stress level. I remember being asked to “compete” in a swim race at one of the Wisconsin School swim practices. I recall that in the “marathon” (for me) 25 yard individual medley, I set a new WORLD record, which I am sure still stands, and in the process, I had a major “wardrobe malfunction” that occurred when I dove into the pool.

(Editor’s note. When Mr. English dove into the pool, the force of his “racing” dive pulled down his swim trunks to his knees--- unbeknownst to everyone. He stayed under water for what seemed

like three minutes correcting his “wardrobe malfunction.” The swim coaches grew concerned and thought he was drowning and were about ready to jump in and do a lifeguard rescue. After Mr. English made it to the end of the pool— in WORLD record time— he told everyone the “rest of the story” and it always has been a source of humor.

12. What do you consider the top three “True North” values that administrators should never lose sight of or compromise?

- *Loyalty to the children— they come first.*
- *Ability to listen to your staff, parents and the kids.*
- *Be visible!! Walk around the school 2 to 3 times a day so everyone can see and talk with you.*

13. You are seen, and for good reason, as “The People Person’s Person.” How valuable is keeping the human interpersonal element at the forefront and the technical aspects secondary?

I believe that interpersonal should be ahead of technical with all my heart. One example is assigning a teacher who had super people skills and who was not too technically trained to initiate the Optacon program. It was a hugely successful program largely in part because the teacher’s interpersonal skills. If she had not sold the technical program it would not have been successful.

“ True North values are always have loyalty to the children. Students come first. Always listen to your staff, parents, and the kids. Be visible! Walk around the school two to three times a day so everyone can see and talk with you.”

--Bill English

14. If you had to do it all over again what would you do differently?

I don’t know that I would do anything differently. I had been given many opportunities to go to a variety of places, but when weighing out the options we chose Wisconsin and chose to retire there. I wouldn’t go back and reverse those decisions at all. Everything worked out for me the way it should. I’d do it all over again. I would hope I wouldn’t have made the same mistakes twice.

15. What is one thing about Bill English that many people might not know---and now will?

I asked my daughter, Betsy, and she gave me this example.

“When Dad received the phone call about winning the Migel Medal, he was very pleased as well as humbled. To burn up some of that excitement, he pushed an empty wheel barrow up and

down the lane at Duck Lake several times, never putting a thing in it— he just pushed it. He does not boast about his accomplishments as he believes we all work WITH (not for) each other toward the common goal of educating visually impaired children. But in this moment, he was jumping up and down on the inside and pushing an empty wheel barrow on the outside. He is an amazing man!”

16. COSB’s top award is named after you. What would you say to those recipients who have received the Bill English Leadership Award?



When I call to congratulate the winners, I have told them something I’ve heard about them.

As a group, I want to relay to them my appreciation for their contributions to so positively deal with students, staff and parents of their schools.

I am so grateful that they keep improving our schools, which are so critical for our students.

Janet and Bill met at the Kentucky School for the Blind where his “catch of a lifetime” taught art. Bill frequently refers to Janet as his best friend. Their daughter, Betsy, a speech and language clinician lives in Wisconsin and, of all Bill’s admirers, she definitely is the President of his fan club.

17. If your granddaughter Kaitlyn, told you and Janet, that she wanted to be a TVI like her grandparents were, how would this make you and Janet feel?

Very proud. Of course. I am sure I would be emotional and very happy. Our daughter Betsy followed in Janet’s and my footsteps and became a speech and language clinician. This made us both very proud. There is no higher calling than working with children.

18. What is the value of extracurricular— or as you always called them— “co-curricular” activities?

I believe they are “co-curricular” and are an integral part of the curriculum. Co-curriculars are important for every kid to have the feeling of importance, accomplishment, belonging, being like their siblings and kids in the public schools. Having the opportunity to be on a team is so beneficial for these children and young adults. It is part of a complete education experience. It helps them to grow emotionally and achieve academically. It improves their self-esteem. At

times, the co-curricular activity could be the “starting block” for a kid to achieve other great things and develop into a well-rounded person.

19. What makes a specialized school for the blind “special?”

To a large extent the extra-curricular and the other expanded core curriculum opportunities makes our schools special. These in many ways separate us from the public schools. Also, at our schools, a child can grow emotionally. Specialized teachers are there to understand and are trained in the area to help the student grow. Our schools give a child a chance to grow and develop.

I hope this answer is shared with all staff in all schools to keep everyone connected to this goal. Please have everyone in every school send out this newsletter to convey to all staff to be positive and follow this goal of helping kids. Have kids be in an environment that is positive and focused “what you can do” and not what you can’t. This is crucial. Also everyone, every student, in some way, must be involved because we know that all kids can participate and all can benefit.

20. In the future do you think there will still be a need for residential schools for blind and low vision children?

There will be always be a need, but will our schools be there? It depends on the attitude and the values of each school’s governing body, i.e. the state superintendent, the department of education, the school board, or another state department. It is our job to teach our students, but it is also our duty to make sure our schools are here in the future for the students who need and benefit from our services.