The education reform community lost a champion in August when John E. Brandl died of cancer on the eve of his 71st birthday. John was many things in his lifetime: gas station attendant, Army ROTC officer, Harvard-trained economist, McNamara “Whiz Kid,” Deputy Assistant Secretary for Education in the Johnson administration, Minnesota state legislator, professor, dean of public affairs, scholar, author, mentor, husband, father, and friend to many. He is best known in education reform circles as the sponsor of legislation to develop and expand school choice in Minnesota, especially the nation’s first law charter school. In 2005 he received the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Excellence in Education Prize for Valor and was saluted as the “godfather of school choice.”

He was my godfather as well, in fact and deed if not formally in name. My mother and he grew up in the same neighborhood in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and remained close friends their entire lives. I first met John on March 24, 1965, when I was two weeks old and John was starting to explore strategies of education reform at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. One of my uncles was named my godfather but was unable to attend the baptism. John stepped into the role, supposedly just for that day, and never stepped out of it. That was John.

When I was 13, I had a seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge about American history, politics, and public policy. My mom confessed to John that she was having great difficulty “feeding the beast” of my interests. John had a simple solution, “Put him on a bus to the Twin Cities and I will take him with me to the legislature.” John was a state representative and a member of the Democrat-Farmer-Labor (DFL) majority at that time. In the morning he gave me a tour of the state Capitol and allowed me to sit in on a DFL strategy session. John and I then had lunch with the Speaker of the House, Harry Sieben. It was the penultimate day of the legislative session, so dozens of important bills came up for a vote in the afternoon. John found me a seat on the House floor and set me up with a copy of “House Orders” so that I could follow the action. For a social studies nerd like me, this was heaven.

John was an accomplished scholar as well as a lawmaker. Although he was an economist by training, the ideas that drove him were primarily Madisonian and Tocquevillian. From Madison, John took the idea that the worse angels of our nature need to be checked and the better angels encouraged through government-designed incentive systems. From Tocqueville he drew the insight that human needs are best satisfied by and within community institutions such as families and churches. Parental school choice fit perfectly within John’s intellectual framework for effective service delivery, and he championed all forms of it—vouchers, charters, tax credits, magnet schools, and open enrollment—throughout his academic and policymaking career, knowing full well that his outspoken support for this policy would limit his ability to rise through the ranks of his party.

In June, more than 300 of John’s family members and friends converged on the Humphrey Institute in Minneapolis for a dinner in his honor. A common theme of the tribute speeches was how John was a master at disagreeing with someone without being disagreeable. He never backed down from a fight but he also never disparaged his opponent. In his eyes, all people were equally dignified human beings and wondrous gifts from God, even if they didn’t share his point of view.

I was blessed to have a final telephone conversation with John Brandl four days before he died. I wanted to share something special with this man who had shared so much with so many. I told him, “John, you probably know that you taught me a lot about how to be a public policy scholar. What you may not know is that you also taught me how to be a man.”

Rest in peace, my friend. We, on the other hand, still have work to do.

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