

# A Final Essay As Tribute

By Gail S. Eisen, Ph.D.

Through the prism of memory, students have varying degrees of recall in relation to teachers from their past. For the vast majority of Westchester High School students, the flood of memories of Pete Skrumbis and his superb teaching style will be far from vague.

Pete influenced an entire generation of students, from the 1960s through his retirement in 1987. I had the privilege of attending several of Pete's courses, each one rich in academic content and infused with warmth and dynamic discussions. One of Pete's greatest strengths was his ability to synthesize diverse strands of US History – from life in the Antebellum South to a detailed view of the 1920s through the lens of social historian Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* – and to bring these narratives to life for 15-year-olds living on the Pacific Coast of the US.

Pete taught with humor, reason, and keen relational skills. His style embraced anecdotes that captured our imaginations. He knew how to paint vivid visual pictures during lectures, and discussion periods included probing questions and follow-ups that insisted we supply evidence for any stance we might assume.

Some of the most significant learning for me related to vocabulary development. There was a rhythm to his lectures, and I was dimly aware of the subtle linguistic templates that his words and cadences etched upon my mind. Because of the nature of the topics we studied, I was introduced to the landscape of US slavery in ways I had never imagined.

It was in Pete's classes that we gained our first exposure to the economics of slavery and the language of brutality. Suddenly the terms *chattel* and *shackles* and *West African slave markets* and *disease-ridden cargo holds* and *forced separation of families* and *anti-miscegenation laws* entered our suburban vocabularies.

Soon we learned about the power of tobacco as a cash-crop resource, sadistic hamstringing punishments meted out to slaves who had attempted daring escapes, lingering Jim Crow laws, virulent Klan gatherings, segregated drinking fountains, exclusionary rules in hotels and eateries, and the reality of political disenfranchisement in the modern era.

It was Pete who first alerted us to the nascent concept of Affirmative Action and crafted this line, which I memorized on the spot: “With all that you have learned about the roots of slavery, you can see why Affirmative Action is like stepping up and paying the bill of history NOW.”

As I sat in his classroom, I sensed that his integrative teaching style was of college-calibre. It was not only the new vocabulary and the required texts by acclaimed historians that supplemented our standard textbook. It was not only his clear and creative mastery of an immense subject area and his tremendous associative powers. Nor was it his decades-long tenure at a single school and our palpable awareness of an essential continuity in our learning. Nor, even, the later realization that my attendance at Pete’s classes had allowed me to score quite well on the Advanced Placement History test, despite the fact I had never spent even one day in the formal, year-long AP preparatory class.

It was much more than all of this: Pete always had an eye toward social conscience and wanted us to see beyond our own era. He encouraged his students to be alert to community and social responsibilities. His narratives alluded sometimes to the role of compassion, and he wanted us to be mindful of the tendency toward rationalization in a society in which citizens do not necessarily start out on an equal footing.

Like many of Pete’s students, I was fortunate to be invited to occasional dinners with his family, was privy to Adrienne’s delicious recipes, and was the beneficiary of roots from the fragrant mint vines growing in their backyard. They welcomed me like a member of their large family, and I will always remember the warm hospitality and spirited dialogue emanating from their table. I also carried Pete’s lessons far from California: I was able to send him photographs of my visit to the Zanzibar Slave Market following a set of lectures in East Africa, and the emotions that surfaced during that somber site tour took me back to my front-row seat in Pete’s classroom.

Pete’s loss came so suddenly that my sadness merged with confusion. At the core, I felt that the world was suddenly off-kilter, as he had served as an anchor and political barometer for so many in his friendship network. For 48 hours I pondered how I might create an appropriate tribute, and suddenly the idea came: Do exactly as Pete, scholar of history, would wish – craft a narrative, tell the story with forthrightness, imply a belief in the positive arc of history, and infuse it with love.

This is my small attempt at a tribute to a pedagogical giant.

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