

THE BUTCH VARNO STIMULUS

by Roger Ralph*

If you “Google” “Butch Varno” you will learn a lot about Butch and his special five decade relationship to Vermont’s Middlebury College. What you will not discover there is what I mean by Butch’s Stimulus – more on that shortly – but first some context:



Butch Varno and Roger Ralph at Dodgers-Phillies Game, August 1964

1. PICKING UP BUTCH

As a sophomore at Middlebury in 1960 I happened to pick up Butch and his Grandmother who was wheeling him back to town after a football game when a snowstorm kicked up. This proved the beginning of a quite remarkable public service college tradition.

By the time he became an honorary member of the class of 1963 at our 45th Class Reunion, Butch had become a celebrity. Sports Illustrated’s Rick Reilly’s 2003 column “Picking Up Butch” and the Emmy winning ESPN documentary that followed put Butch’s story on the

national stage. Google “Picking Up Butch” and then go to ESPN VIDEO, Nov. 2, 2010. For more than fifty years Middlebury student volunteers have tutored Butch and its athletes have transported him to its football and basketball games. For the latter, Butch sits on the bench, supplies frequent in game advice to his friend Coach Jeff Brown, and on more than one occasion has been told by the refs to “pipe down” or his beloved Middlebury Panthers will be getting a technical.

Having severe cerebral palsy, Butch – now age 62 – has never been able to walk by himself. Like millions of disabled children around the world his daily care was provided by a Mother – in this case Helen. Helen Varno was a proud private person who never drove a car, never owned a house, and never asked much for herself. Virtually every day of her life Helen got Butch up, put him to bed, and in between cared for him. We ask ourselves, could we have done what – fill in the blanks – Helen Varno did for 65 years of her life. This article is dedicated to both Helen and Butch in the hope that it gets read by someone in the Obama administration, in the non-profit sector, or local school systems and stimulates an institutional difference that lasts.



Butch and his two favorite coaches, Middlebury Head Basketball Coach Jeff Brown (center) and Russ Reilly Assistant Coach and former Director of Athletics at Middlebury. They are a weekly factor in Butch’s life.

2. THE TIME IS RIGHT

The phrase “THE BUTCH VARNO STIMULUS” is especially timely now (February 2009) as the country is in the midst of its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930’s and for those without much cash fears associated with uncertainty palatable. Our faith in America’s core economic institutions, brands, and individuals has been shaken like never before – can we say Alan Greenspan.



Helen and Butch at Fire and Ice, Middlebury, VT October 2010

This severe rattling fortunately is countered by three things: First, a renewed faith in the correlation of America’s stated ideals and what is really possible because as its 44th President America elected its first African American President, Barack Hussein Obama. Second, we inherently believe that no matter the situation we as a nation and as individuals will find a way to make things better as have Helen and Butch. Third, now more than ever before in our nation’s history there exists local and national resources, information, and a powerful national movement among old and young alike to “make things better for others”. For the past decade in high schools and colleges and universities across the country students have been increasingly engaging in one sort or another of volunteer/community service activities both formal and informal.



Butch takes a few steps with help from his guys, members of the Middlebury College basketball team.

In every community there is a story to be told about a specific volunteer’s extraordinary impact on his or her community. Here is one relevant to the Butch Varno Stimulus. The Baltimore Sun’s Feb. 7, 2009 Opinion page, told the mesmerizing story of 28 year old John’s Hopkins engineering graduate student, Sarah Hemminger. Ms. Hemminger in 2004 started a mentoring program to help Baltimore’s most challenging teens. Her Incentive Mentoring Program has shepherded 15 Dunbar High School students through graduation and into college. It has also engaged 200 Hopkins students as volunteers

and received financial help from Hopkins according to the article. Ann LoLordo, the Sun writer, truly appreciates what is really involved:

“The rest of us should be humbled by her (Sarah’s) relentless pursuit of a class of kids that others would have given up on. Ms. Hemminger and her band of mind-bending mentors got this far with heart, conviction, and Grit. Grit is an old- fashioned word but that is what it takes to

negotiate the messy circumstances of these teenagers lives. Drug addicted parents. Homelessness. Imprisoned fathers. Sexual abuse. Truancy. Gangs. Mental Illness.”

Everyone reading this has a like minded story where we are humbled by the giving, selfless, results producing individual quiet or even “loud” acts of committed individual change makers like Ms. Hemminger. No doubt, going forward there will continue to be the inspired and motivating Sarah Hemminger’s of the world, and thank goodness. The challenge, however, for the Dunbar High Schools of the world and institutions like Johns Hopkins, and Middlebury, and Departments and Boards of Education is to figure out ways to move many many more at risk kids from that “at risk” categorization. Those concerned with and responsible for our local and national educational policies need to act on the answer to these kinds of questions:

- Would the high school graduation rate for ninth graders in the Baltimore City school system be higher (it is now @50%) if strategically, mentoring programs were more concentrated on far younger children?
- How can government, educational institutions, and non-profit organizations better apply the knowledge that educating mothers of at risk children early on in the right way will pay big dividends when that child starts school?
- How can the foundation that the Sarah Hemminger’s of the world establish best be supported so that it not only survives but prospers when a Sarah leaves?



Butch’s 2014/2015 student team volunteer coordinators Kirra Simonson and Theodora Yoch.

I have been pondering these questions ever since participating in a seminar on Middlebury College’s community service programs during my 45th Reunion in June 2008. Tiffany Nourse Sargent the able Director of the school’s Alliance for Civic Engagement told the audience that half of Middlebury’s 2450 undergraduates were involved in some form of community service. The college’s Athletic Director, Erin Quinn, reported on the launch of a new community service initiative with its college athletes mentoring elementary, middle, and high school students needing help.

Standing next to Butch I shared with the audience that I had a call early that morning from my brother in Seattle telling me about a parent of a disabled child, having heard Butch’s story, started a similar program linking high school and college athletes with disabled and at risk kids. My classmates- most three years from 70- smiled in agreement when I recalled that when we attended Middlebury our concept of community service was picking up beer cans before parents weekend. Most assuredly this was for appearance sake. We were not saving the planet. Despite our narrow view then, I am happy to report that many of my classmates and friends moved in that direction later in life, Charlie MacCormack runs Save the Children, Bill Delahunt is an effective Congressman from MA and Bruce Bailey and Craig Stewart were influential at Seattle’s Lakeside School (Bill Gates’ Alma Mater) in making its students more community and international minded. And even I - thanks to Butch - have moved beyond beer can removal.

3. WHY THE BUTCH VARNO STIMULUS?

What virtually all school based volunteer programs – and Middlebury is no exception – have in common is the stated goal of providing a meaningful “real world” learning and helping experience for the engaged student. And this experience for the student volunteer and volunteers everywhere inevitably produces the common refrain, “I got so much more out of this experience than _____ “. “I was the one who really benefitted not _____” Missing from this equation is the extraordinary opportunity for the nation to capitalize on the country’s impetus for community service to make lasting positive changes in local schools. Our educational institutions have framed high school or college community service for participating student volunteers as an obelisk not a three legged stool. Absent from the equation is a plan to utilize the availability, enthusiasm, idealism, and skills of student volunteers as a means to help Easton PA Elementary; Mobile AL Middle, or Sacramento CA High become better institutions long term. Currently almost all the focus is concentrated on the student volunteer and training he or she to be an effective volunteer. This is a power failure: Take a typical school in America’s inner cities- or for that matter most suburbs. In any classroom there will be students who need more one on one help to read better; students struggling with math; students whose writing skills are well below par. Yet absent a long term game plan between the particular school being served by volunteers and the institution providing and training volunteers, his or her impact on the pre-school; elementary; middle; or high school will be of a transitory nature. The depth, sustainability, and scalability of these unpaid bright giving potential agents of change- ie the student volunteer- will be nil or fleeting at best. As anyone working as a teacher or a volunteer in a particular school knows the effectiveness of what happens in a specific classroom is a function of the skill of the teacher, the resources available, the support of the principal, and the overall culture of the school combined with the “chemistry” between the volunteer and the student. The ability of a student volunteer resource to make much of a difference will depend on all these factors and success will be more a matter of alignment of the stars than a thoughtful long term plan.

Can you imagine the long term impact possible if the trained student volunteers’ activities are framed by the priority needs of the host school and reflects the latest learning research available? Assuming the volunteer wants to tutor and has relating skills, his or her capability of, say, enhancing a student’s verbal and/or math skills will be greatly enhanced. Beyond that, some of these “tutor/student; mentor/mentee” relationships, as the example of Butch Varno so well illustrates, will go on for years and to some degree be life changing for one or both parties.

It can also lead to the institution itself doing something unexpected and extraordinary. What Middlebury did when Butch and his mother’s rented apartment was flooded in 2006 (they could never afford to own a home) was quite remarkable to me. Instead of worrying about “making an exception to the rules”; “creating a dangerous precedent”; or down the road real problems the Varno’s inevitably would face Middlebury found a permanent place for Butch and Helen to live. Middlebury renovated an older property the college owned but was not using so that it would work splendidly for someone wheelchair confined. Butch and his mom in fact moved into this house and enjoyed it briefly until Helen became seriously ill. Once this occurred, both Helen and Butch required 24 hour professional care. Fortunately both were able to move to the town’s Helen Porter Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center largely because of the goodness and capability of

Middlebury administrator Tiffany Nourse Sargent. Tiffany in her our own quiet competent warm way still makes sure there are Middlebury student volunteers who spend time with Butch.

Since the Varno's apartment got flooded out I have thought a lot about what it took for Middlebury to come forward as an institution and commit substantial funds to help one family. Until this time, the goodwill train of students that tutored Butch over the years (those like Terry Colvin, Kevin Kelleher, Sr., Sarah Smith, Abigail Sanders, Kevin Kelleher, Jr. who checked up on Butch long after they graduated, the athletes who transported him to games, the coaches who took special interest in Butch as did Russ Reilly and Jeff Brown year after year) kept rolling informally and seemingly on its own momentum.

In 2006, Middlebury as an institution thanks to President Liebowitz and the school's Director of Advancement, Mike Schoenfeld, stepped to the plate and provided \$200,000 and launched a \$200,000 matching fund raising campaign to renovate a house in town where Butch and his mom could spend the rest of their days. Long after Butch and his volunteers are gone Middlebury's Community Response Fund will be substantial. My hope, however, is that these extraordinary and blessed institutions like Middlebury and Johns Hopkins and the folk who play leadership roles there take the possibilities inherent to the Butch Varno Stimulus to a far deeper and broader level.



Butch Varno with one of his all time favorite "girls," Sarah Smith.

4. THE REAL WORLD GOING FORWARD

I started tutoring Butch back in 1960 and Middlebury students have done so continuously to this day. Yet Butch has always struggled to read. If we as volunteers consciously applied "best practices"- to use a business term- in teaching Butch would he have made progress over the years in reading? The truth is, I don't know.

Could our school systems and mentoring organizations be more effective by using reliable current research? A March 2009 Impact Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Education's Student Mentoring Program, for instance, identifies significant problems in school-based mentoring programs. The study concluded because it takes two months to simply get the program going and because the academic year is short, statistically significant improvements by students generally have not been great. Would partnering with community organizations so that the Mentee involved in a school-based mentoring program is consciously linked to a summer program make a difference? Again, I don't know.

What I do know is that the thousands of effectively relating "cool" mentors/tutors throughout the country could do better if preschools, elementary and beyond had the intention and resources to maximize use of this volunteer source.

And you can just imagine a classroom teacher reading this suggestion and saying, “just what I need, one more pie in the sky idea, one more thing to add on, one more do gooder from down the street telling us how to make things better-----thanks but no thanks. Let me get back to teaching!”

Not only do I appreciate this sentiment, I think it is on target. It is beyond my knowledge base and experience to create a scalable plan that has a shot of making it to and lasting in the real world classroom or before and afterschool care program. But I do know somewhere a BUTCH VARNO STIMULUS idea will do some lasting good- and that is a good thing.



Seated: Butch Varno; Russ Reilly. l-r: Tiffany Sargent; Elaine Ralph; Roger Ralph; Rene Brown; Jeff Brown.

5. POSTSCRIPT

One of Butch’s endearing qualities is that he has a very good sense of humor almost always. Below is a wonderful true story about the rare occasion when he did not:

Several years ago as Middlebury opened its basketball season, Butch’s new rookie volunteer from the football team was given the assignment of getting Butch to the game. As the game was about to start the Coach looked down the bench and found someone in a wheelchair right in Butch’s usual spot. Who the heck is this?

“THIS IS BUSTER!” the rookie replied suddenly realizing that he had delivered the wrong person to the game and Butch was cooling his heels at home, anxiously awaiting his ride to the game.

And now the rest of the story which is also true and not imagined. In May of 2009, Richard “Butch” Varno got a new roommate at the Helen Porter Rehabilitation Center – Buster and Butch can now trade tales about that season opener.

**Roger Ralph, March 2009. Roger is a 1963 graduate of Middlebury College, a husband, father, grandfather, health club owner, and on the Boards of Maryland Mentoring Partnership and the Cal Ripken, Sr. Foundation.*