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Interview with Mr. Ernie Brown

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. ERNIE BROWN

FALL SEMESTER 1993

BY

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EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

ACES 803
DR. MILLER

CHAPTER II

INTERVIEW WITH ERNIE BROWN

Scott: We are here tonight to interview Mr. Ernie Brown for our educational research class taught by Dr. Miller. My name is Scott Springston and the camera operator is David Blackman.

Scott: *Mr. Brown, what inspired you to become an educator?*

Mr. Brown: I kind of became an educator by default. I actually had my goals set on becoming a forestry person, but I didn't prepare myself very well when I was in high school. When I got to college, I struggled with some of the requirements, and I could see that I was not going to be able to handle the math and some of the requirements for a degree in forestry. I set my sights a little lower and thought teaching looked like it would be fun, and I liked working with kids.

Scott: *A lot of people attribute that to one specific teacher in high school or anywhere in school that spurred them; in your case, was it something you thought of or inspiration from other teachers?*

Mr. Brown: When I graduated from high school, I was not even thinking of going to college. Ever showing up at a high school again was probably the last thing I ever intended to do, so it was quite a change from the time I graduated from high school until the time I graduated from

college: a change in attitude, philosophy, and direction. I can't say that I became a teacher because I had a teacher that inspired me or was a particularly strong influence on my life or anything like that, I just kind of fell into it.

Scott: *How many total years have you been in education?*

Mr. Brown: I've been in the classroom for twenty seven years, not continuously, but for twenty seven years.

Scott: *Has that all been at the secondary level?*

Mr. Brown: Yes.

Scott: *Are you certified only at the secondary level?*

Mr. Brown: Just secondary.

Scott: *For science? Is it biology, chemistry or others?*

Mr. Brown: Biology, chemistry and I was endorsed in Earth Science but I'm not sure that I still am. They upped the requirements some and I wouldn't still be endorsed then.

Scott: *Where have you taught?*

Mr. Brown: I taught for three years, after I graduated from college, at Gorham, which is about fifteen miles east of Hays. Then I took a year off and went to graduate school at South Dakota University. Then I returned to Wakeeny and have been there ever since. I student taught in

Wakeeny, so I knew I liked the system and knew that I could work there. From South Dakota it was a long way to drive to do interviews, so when the Wakeeny job opened up, I jumped on it.

Scott: *How was that year off and getting back into the classroom after taking a year off?*

Mr. Brown: I enjoyed it. First of all, I spent most of my upper college classes memorizing material for tests; memorize it, take a test, memorize it, take a test. A lot of it didn't make any sense in terms of tying concepts together; things didn't fit together like they should. The three years that I spent teaching gave me the opportunity to learn some of the things that I had memorized. I was able to use them, and that prepared me for going on to graduate school. I had a better grasp of fundamentals and was able to do the more sophisticated things.

Scott: *What were some of your most memorable experiences in teaching, not necessarily just in the classroom but extracurricular activities, coaching, field research or in the classroom?*

Mr. Brown: I've had a lot of fun with kids on field trips. My training at Fort Hays and at South Dakota University is primarily field orientation. I've had most of the "ology" classes, mammology, ornithology, ichthyology; I've had all that kind of stuff. I'm trained pretty well to do

things outside, so we do a lot of field work outside. We don't spend a lot of time in Biology I outside, but we spend quite a bit of time outside in Biology II up until the time it gets cold. In the fall we are studying water and doing studies on a small creek south of town. In the spring, as soon as it gets to where we can get out, we bird watch and do field studies, and those are some of the enjoyable things for me from a classroom perspective. For twenty years I coached golf and I have a lot of memorable experiences there. I've enjoyed the experiences I've had on the Science Club field trip when all the seniors go to Denver. I've had a lot of fun and enjoyable experiences, a lot more fun experiences than unpleasant ones.

Scott: *Do you think that your interest in forestry carried over into your interest in doing a lot of activities outside?*

Mr. Brown: No I don't think so. I think a lot of that comes from the fact that I had so many courses that relate to being outside, like mammology class, ichthyology class and ornithology class. You can teach the fundamentals of ornithology in the classroom, but if you're really going to be a bird man, you have to get outside where the birds are. The same is true with mammals; you have to get some traps and go out and find out where they live and what they eat and when they are active. Outside

activities are kind of a natural thing from the training I got at school.

Scott: *Throughout your successful career as an educator you have received several national and state-wide awards. Would you please share a little of that with us?*

Mr. Brown: For the most of my twenty-four years at Wakeeny, I just was a little ol' biology teacher at a little ol' school doing pretty much my own thing, not tied in too closely with anyone else. I did not share widely with anyone else what I did. When Governor Hayden was in office, a friend of mine was on the Krista McAuliffe selection committee. Governor Hayden and Rob Ross had been friends because they were both from Atwood. I had been doing a water study for years, and I didn't have any kind of publication or organized thing, I just kind of did it little bit by little bit by little bit, activity after activity. Rob suggested that I propose to write it all up and not publish it but to make it available to biology and science teachers all over the state of Kansas. He suggested I apply for the Krista McAuliffe grant to get the money and supplies to do that. He had suggested it at least a couple of times before he finally put the bite on me and made it pretty tough for me not to do it. Finally I got it done in 1989. I was quite surprised to find out that I had won the grant.

Scott: *What were some of the things that you did? You talked about*

putting together labs?

Mr. Brown: What I did was to organize all of the things that I had been doing and put some classroom discussion material into booklet form. Included was the classroom information on acid rain, and different kinds of things in the water such as dissolved oxygen, dissolved pH and those kinds of things. I also included some activities to go out and learn about those kinds of things. To get the basic information in the classroom and then go out and test for pH, and test the water for different kinds of invertebrate animals and things like that.

Scott: *That's your "Fresh Water Ecology?"*

Mr. Brown: Yes.

Scott: *Is that still available to teachers?*

Mr. Brown: Yes, in fact I was at a Kansas Association of Biology Teachers meeting in Salina and got rid of the last twenty that I had. I said got rid of because one of my goals for next summer is to rewrite it, because I have changed it a lot since I wrote it four or five years ago. I've added some new labs and I don't use some of the old labs, so I want to rewrite it and this gives me the chance to start over again.

Scott: *You received some other grants like the Toyota Tapestry grant in '90-'91. What was that about?*

Mr. Brown: Well, winning the McAuliffe was kind of a shock apparently to most everyone. After I finally won it Rob Ross got all over me because he was doing some kind of research, I think it might have been a masters dissertation on who won grants. His data was tending to show that it was mostly minorities and/or women that were winning those kinds of grants, so he was kind of aggravated at me that I threw a monkey wrench in his works by being a non-minority male and still winning something like that. At any rate, the fact that I won something like that drew some attention to the fact that we were doing some things out here in Western Kansas, and I gave away a lot of those books. One of the conditions of the grant was that if I won, I would do the book and then take it to teachers' meetings and give it to people and show them how I use it and encourage them to use it. In doing that, other people saw that I was doing some things that were worthwhile and so there was kind of a coalition set up. There were five of us. Most of us had some kind of award behind us; Donna Cooper had the Presidential Award, and John Wachols had the Outstanding Biology Teacher, Steve Cates from Olathe and Brad Williamson had national awards, and so we got together and set up a coalition so that we could do studies and set up a computer network to do different kinds of science projects. Different from the cookbook where you know what the

answer is going to be when you start the lab, some open-ended things. We took off and wrote up a proposal for the Toyota Tapestry Grant and won it. Our proposal was that we were going to set up a computer network along the I-70 corridor to do leaf stomate counts and ultraviolet experiments along with different kinds of projects. We were going to meet and have our kids talk about the research projects. We had an overnight at Rock Springs and we were going to talk to some NASA people and promote science from an, 'I wonder what would happen,' perspective not, 'When is the known thing going to happen?' We were pretty successful and were one of two high school computer networks in the United States. The other network as I recall was in Oregon, and ours seemed to be going really well compared to theirs. Ours seemed to be doing better than the one up there, so we applied to Toyota again the next year. The first year our grant was one of twenty \$10,000 grants. You could apply again the second year and there would be four grants of \$20,000 awarded. The Toyota people sent people out to interview us and look at what we had done. Donna and I went to Olathe one day, and John was there, and all five of us showed them what we had been doing. Their concern was that out here in western Kansas, we were just kind of being carried along because the McAuliffe award sounded good,

and the presidential award sounded good and we really weren't involved with it much. We sold them on the idea that we were doing things together, and we were working with the computers trying to communicate, and so they gave us the \$20,000 for the next year. We bought more computers, more equipment, more modems and got lots more people involved so that now it's not so much an I-70 thing as it initially was. There's now probably fifteen teachers that are involved. It's been good, it's exposed me to a lot of new things and allowed me to expose my kids to new kinds of scientific things.

Scott: *Did all of this accumulate in the Kansas Master Teacher Award?*

Mr. Brown: I think that it helped a lot. The Kansas Master Teacher Award was something that surprised me. In the first place, I was surprised my education association nominated me. It took a tremendous amount of work. I couldn't believe how much work people put in to making my notebook, letters, clippings and all the things like that. I was surprised when I won it. I guess I don't have very high expectations of myself along those lines. I just do things, and the things you do, you don't realize that somebody else thinks that's a neat idea. I think that it all led to that award, and it has been a good experience to have won it.

Scott: *How has the administrative and school board support been for*

your awards and the things you do?

Mr. Brown: It's been good but it's not been overwhelming in terms of oh..., I guess I don't know how to answer that. They have supported me and wrote letters for me. When I got the McAuliffe award, I was given about \$30,000, which the school district benefited from because I turned around and spent about \$24,000 on microscopes, cameras, VCR's, high resolution TV, and stereo dissecting scopes. They were supportive, but it's the kind of thing where they say, 'That's great' and, 'We appreciate it' and that's probably the last you hear about it.

Scott: *I understand you instruct a biology methods course each fall semester at Fort Hays State University. How did you get involved in this?*

Mr. Brown: About five years ago, I believe, Dr. Fleharty called me and asked me if I'd be interested in teaching a methods course. I was pretty intimidated at first, and I told him no. I didn't think I would be interested in it. For one reason, I didn't think I knew enough about what he wanted me to teach, and for another I didn't need anything else to do. So we left it at that and then a month or a month-and-a-half later he asked me again if I'd be interested in doing it, and I said I wasn't very interested; and he said, 'What is it that makes you not want to do this,' and I said, 'I'm not sure what a methods course should amount to.' He said that this would

be a relatively small class, seldom more than nine or ten kids, and what they need to get out of this class is information that someone who has been in the classroom as long as you have can share with them. I asked him what he wanted me to teach. He said, 'You teach them what you think they need to know.' I said, 'Is that it,' and he said, 'Yes, teach them what they need to know,' and I agreed to do it. So then I sat down and looked at some things that Donna Cooper had used when she taught the class, and I had some experience when Dr. Hewlett taught it because I had come over every year and been a guest lecturer on teaching Advanced Biology, or environmental education. So I sat down and listed the things that I thought students should know. They ought to know about interviewing for jobs, student teaching, what to expect and what kinds of situations to stay out of, and they ought to know about inventorying a room, checking to make sure that things are there, and making lesson plans and things like that. With that in mind I took it on, and I change it a little each year but basically we cover about the same things, the kinds of issues that kids have questions about.

Scott: *It's almost like a course to teach prospective teachers things they don't necessarily get in their other classes.*

Mr. Brown: Yes, things like how to keep an overhead file, how to make

lesson plans, how to go to a job interview. What are some questions you should ask, like 'Do I get to keep my keys?' and 'Do I get access to my room in the summer time?' Things that maybe would help keep someone out of a job that once they signed a contract and found out all the details, they would wish maybe they had a chance to reconsider.

Scott: *If you were to give one piece of advice to prospective educators what would that piece of advice be?*

Mr. Brown: Can I give them two?

Scott: *OK.*

Mr. Brown: My first piece of advice to someone going into education would be to figure on working, to go into it intending to do the best job that you possibly can, which I can't see anyone going into a job not with that expectation of themselves. Realize that once you've been through the drum and spent a year in the classroom that it's not over with, that you still have to work hard the next year to make it a better year, and then you have to work hard to make the third year better than the second. It is a continual process; it's not a job that you do and make lesson plans up one time, and then you teach them for the next ten years. You continually work and as much as possible keep current with what is going on in your field. Learn, read the paper, read books, go to school, read magazines,

find out what is going on in your field and keep current with it. The second thing that I would advise would be to join a good professional organization, and if you don't become involved as an officer, and I don't recommend that you try to become an officer, but at least you become involved with the organization. Find out what they do, go to their meetings, and I recommend the Kansas Association of Teachers of Science. That organization is really the one that got me out and active and involved with other teachers and got me introduced to other teachers, and I found out what all kinds of great things teachers were doing and how willing and eager they were to say, 'Hey I'm doing this, try it you'll like it,' and share ideas and labs. Get involved with an organization like that and it will help you become a better teacher.

Scott: *All too often teachers are isolated in their own rooms.*

Mr. Brown: Yes.

Scott: *Are teachers willing to give information?*

Mr. Brown: I've never seen a good science teacher that wouldn't give you anything they had. I'm not sure that if we had merit pay and you and I were in the same district, and you had some Biology classes and I had some Biology classes, I'm not sure that merit pay might not make a difference. If you had a good idea, you might not want to share it with me

if it was going to make a difference and make me a better teacher and keep you from getting a raise for merit work. I think that teachers are plenty excited to share things with each other.

Scott: *Have you seen this trend in education, any shift in teachers' or students attitudes or in education in general?*

Mr. Brown: It's hard to say, Scott, what's going on in education. I don't have a real good feel for education. I've read a little bit about some of the things that are going on nationally, and I know that President Reagan wanted a voucher system for kids so that they could check out of the public school and go to the parochial schools or whatever private school that they wanted to go to. That kind of scares me a little bit. I don't like to see public tax money being used in private situations, and it kind of alarms me that people are losing their faith in their public education system; but, on the other hand, I can see why they do because you have all kinds of violence and disruptive students in the public schools, and people want to protect their kids. If you have a disruptive student in your class, that takes ten minutes of your class each day, that means the students that are there to learn get cheated out of an opportunity to learn. For the money they pay, parents want their kids to get an education, and I can certainly see that. I don't know where it's going but, being a public

school teacher, I don't support the voucher system.

Scott: *Public education is a dynamic system that's constantly changing, not only the voucher system but QPA and portfolio assessment and all the latest jargon that is coming forward. Do you lump all of that in the same category?*

Mr. Brown: I don't have a lot of faith, so far, in educational reforms. I've been in it for a long time and I've heard a lot about reform, but I haven't seen a lot. It seems like it cycles and at one time this will be a major reform, and it will be the hottest thing going and pretty soon you don't hear anything more about that, and the next thing, there's something new. I don't have a lot of faith that QPA will ever be the strong thing that some people think it's going to be. I don't see any major changes. Some years back we had competency-based tests where you had to take this test to see how competent you were. To me it seemed like a waste of time. You brought a sophomore in and you said OK take this test and when he was done you said, 'OK you did good,' 'or you didn't do very good,' but there didn't seem to be any, 'You didn't do good; you're going to have to do this remedial work.' The test said this is where you're not very good, and this is where you're going to have to improve, but there weren't any teeth in it that required improvement. We still graduated

them as we had before, but we spent a ton of money on those tests, grading them and giving them. It took classroom time, and maybe some people were helped, but I didn't see a lot of benefit having spent the money and time doing that. I'm not very optimistic about new and great reforms in education; I don't see any of that coming.

Scott: *We appreciate your time. If there is anything else you would like to share with us, you're welcome to.*

Mr. Brown: There isn't anything that comes to mind.

Scott: *Again, we appreciate your time and thank you for allowing us to interview you tonight.*

Mr. Brown: I'm glad to do it and pleased that you asked.