Amos Alonzo Stagg High School has seen many changes since I graduated in May of 2006. Many faculty members have left the district, tempted by excellent retirement packages. The remaining few have shifted their class loads not only to accommodate the vacancies but also to make room for the newest additions to the staff. However, the changes within the school do not reside solely within the faculty. The school received a much needed upgrade: new windows stand where drafty single-panes stood just eight months before and new lunch tables now inhabit the cafeteria.

However, as I walked into room 706, I was greeted by the familiar sights and smells that encompass Mr. Paul Garbrecht’s classroom. Little had changed since I first walked into the room on January 5, 2004 as a sophomore student in Advanced Placement United States Government. In fact, the kidney-bean shaped desks were in the same orientation as they had been that first fateful day.

Up until my sophomore year of high school, I could count the number of male teachers I had encountered on one hand. This was due to the fact that in my primary school district, the honors level classes were taught by women, many of whom I had surpassed in physical height by sixth grade. Therefore, when Mr. Garbrecht, who stands at just over six feet, walked into the room, his entire being demanded respect. He opened the first class period discussing the work we would be facing in the upcoming semester and it seemed unbelievable that it could be humanly possible for anyone to meet his demands. I felt rather intimidated by the course load that first
night and even considered dropping the course. However, I chose to continue in his class, and I quickly adapted to his teaching methods. I even spent extra time outside of the class's scheduled hour discussing politics, arguing viewpoints, and other current events. As the year progressed, I began to see him as more than my AP Government teacher. He had become my mentor.

As I stand back with my high school diploma in hand and observe the day-to-day routine within my alma mater, I am amazed how Mr. Garbrecht was able to teach such a broad range of students with greatly differing backgrounds and intellectual abilities. His never-ending enthusiasm for enlightening others about the world around them undoubtedly fuels his inner drive.

Teachers must have knowledge in a specific topic; however, some of the most effective messages come directly from personal experiences as a first-person viewpoint often provides a unique perspective of the event. Sometimes, it is this perspective that drives an individual to success. Mr. Garbrecht's victory within the classroom is based upon this experience. Paul Garbrecht was born into a turbulent household. It was this turbidity that led him to discover his true passion in life—history. As a child, he grew up without the presence of a fatherly figure. His father was shipped overseas to serve in the United States Army during the Korean War. He returned a broken man. Mr. Garbrecht's father went into drug rehab, and it was at that point Mr. Garbrecht turned to social studies. The subject of history provided the fatherly figure he had been longing for. "The first pillar of Buddhism is the presence of suffering. Suffering lies within social studies—wars, oppression, etc. Social Studies was my refuge." He had found his calling, but he still wasn't sure how he could incorporate it into a profession.

Throughout his teenage years, Mr. Garbrecht held several jobs which have helped him illustrate a meaning behind his lessons within the classroom. During his fourth hour economics
class, Mr. Garbrecht was discussing how even high school students could make influential business decisions. He proceeded to tell the class about his own experiences in small business. At the age of nineteen, he applied for and received a Small Business Administration loan from his local bank. “My brother wanted to start his own furniture business, so I did all the research, walked into the bank with our proposal that was at least this thick,” as he motions with his hands at least four inches apart, “and the next thing we knew, we had a check for $5000. Remember, I was nineteen—almost the same age as all of you.”

When the time came to choose a university to obtain his bachelor’s degree, Mr. Garbrecht decided to stay close to his hometown. His first endeavor landed him at Joliet Junior College where he completed many of the pre-requisites and electives. From there, he progressed to Chicago State University, where he obtained his Bachelors degree in Secondary Education. However, when the time came to enter the workforce as a student teacher, Mr. Garbrecht had no idea as to where he wanted to go. “At that point, I was married, and my wife had access to a database that calculated the probability for growth in different suburbs around Chicago. At the time, District 230 had the greatest potential for growth, so I applied and was accepted.” He was quickly swept into the high school social studies scene, teaching Geography and United States History under the guidance of Mr. Roger Liska, who eventually became Mr. Garbrecht’s mentor. The two formed a friendship during his student teaching and Mr. Liska recommended Mr. Garbrecht for a full-time teaching position once he obtained his teaching license. Sure enough, Mr. Garbrecht landed his first job as a history teacher at Stagg High School in 1993. His dream had come true, to teach history in a middle-class suburban high school.

However, in 2000, Mr. Garbrecht decided he needed to switch gears and do something different. He obtained his master’s degree in Media from Chicago State University and became a
media specialist in the school library. Mr. Garbrecht has always had an interest in media and its effects within the classroom. He spearheaded a project to be able to share course material with other teachers, at first through physical archives, mainly in the form of CDs, and he watched it progress to its current state of specially delegated space on the school’s internal computer network. When asked about the program, Mr. Garbrecht responded, “There’s no point in each teacher creating a new lesson plan and reinventing the wheel that another teacher down the hall implemented a few years before and had great success with. It’s a waste of time that could be better utilized improving the current plans.” His plan has been extremely well accepted not only within Stagg, but the district as well. As a media specialist, Mr. Garbrecht was able to witness first-hand the upcoming advancements in technology. At every opportunity, he would lead sessions teaching students and faculty members about how to use the media available to them to their advantage. He led workshops on everything from how to use the video editing equipment to how to use the internet more efficiently when researching for reports. In 2003, he returned to the social studies department and picked up a rigorous class load: two Advanced Placement United States Government courses and United States History.

Just a few years ago, I was working in the Media Center. Two years ago, I was spending all of my energy on preparing sixty plus students for the AP Government exam in May. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed every minute of it. But I need change; otherwise I’d get bored. Now I’m teaching one section of AP Government, two sections of United States History, and an economics class. I’m still busy; it’s just a different kind of busy.

Although he was no longer a media specialist, his extensive media knowledge became very apparent in his teaching style. All of his lectures were presented in PowerPoint format, pre-printed, and projected onto a thirty foot wall at the front of the room. He would continually refer
to recent articles or videos on the internet from CNN, CBS, NBC, and occasionally FOX News. He even encouraged us to think critically about the lyrics of the most popular songs and how they referenced to current day problems within the government. His incorporation of technology in the classroom was noted in an article printed in the local newspaper, The Daily Southtown.

A reporter from The Daily Southtown, Linda Lutton, came to our classroom on Monday, May 17, 2004, in order to write an article about the fiftieth anniversary of the United State Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education. This Supreme Court ruling declared it was unconstitutional to willingly segregate school districts based solely on racial means (Encarta). All school districts across the country were required to desegregate “with all deliberate speed”; however, to this day, many districts remain predominately Caucasian or black (Brown v. Board). Linda Lutton came to our classroom with the intention of writing an article about the stark differences between the mostly white Stagg High School and the Thornton High School environment which is currently comprised of African American students. Mr. Garbrecht’s room undoubtedly has the largest amount of technology outside of the Media Center. Therefore it was natural for the reporter to be drawn to that aspect of his classroom. When asked about the technology that is present, he replied, “‘this is Disneyland. The kind of technology we have, the kind of opportunities we have’” (Lutton). Although at the time his obsession with the incorporation of technology in the classroom seemed to be out of place, there was an underlying method to the madness. Mr. Garbrecht believes that being able to literally visualize what you are learning is vital to the overall classroom experience: “everything you learn is relevant to today. If you don’t see the relevance, then you are unlikely to retain the information and more often than not, forget it. Then, history repeats itself and we have learned nothing from our past.”
Teaching high school social studies in America’s classrooms can be considered a balancing act: juggling many different students from diverse backgrounds and dramatically different learning styles. However, in Mr. Garbrecht’s classroom, individuals seem to lose their distinguishable differences and become unified in one goal: to actively learn about America’s past, present, and future. It is this unification that brings Mr. Garbrecht back to work every day. “My job’s difficult because of the polarization. Society has taught us to choose sides, to be on someone’s team. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are unifiers. They are such big ideas—bigger than any individual—they wanted us to unite for one cause, and that is what I try to convey in my classroom. So far, it’s working.”

Unification within the classroom has become increasingly more difficult. A.A. Stagg High School has always been the most diversified student body of the three district schools. However, a recent influx of lower-income minority students has begun to change the face of the student body. According to the 2003 and 2005 Illinois School Report Card, A.A. Stagg has seen an increase in self-declared minority students jump from 12.5 percent in 2003 to 13.6 percent in 2005. Unfortunately, a positive correlation also exists between the increase in minority students and an increase in both the number of low-income population of the school and the dropout rate. In 2003, 189 students were considered to be low income compared to 213 in 2005. Thirty-five students dropped out of the high school curriculum in 2003 compared to forty-two in 2005. Along with this statistical data, faculty members have also noted a downward trend in work ethic. In fact, the graduating class of 2006 was dubbed by another faculty member as the “last hurrah,” as those in the upcoming classes have significantly lower standardized test scores. For the incoming class of 2011, honors level classes were cancelled due to the low entrance exam scores. As we were walking to make photocopies of the day’s worksheets, Mr. Garbrecht
expounded, "They had to cancel the Team Renaissance program for next year. Only sixty
students for next year's incoming class are eligible for honors. Sixty percent of that same class is
at a basic level. Not regular classes, basic. It's just depressing." These results were quite
surprising for the entire district, as Stagg was well known for its large variety of honors level
courses, and the cancellation of any came as a complete shock.

Even though the dramatic change in the demographics of the school has some effect on
the dropping test scores, Mr. Garbrecht believes another factor can be to blame: lack of parental
contact. In the past few years, he has noticed a dramatic increase in the number of introverted
students that cross the threshold into his classroom every day. Unfortunately for those in the
lower middle class, it is often imperative that both parents hold full-time jobs, often at the
expense of spending more quality time with their children. This has forced many teens to turn to
the internet, and in doing so, fail to form the interpersonal relationships and skills that are so
important later in life. "These kids grew up during the plop-them-in-front-of-the-television era.
Their parents are never around. Half the time, I'm their teacher and parent and that makes my job
more difficult . . . it makes Parent/Teacher Conferences an oxymoron because in effect, I'm
conferencing with myself." As society continues to develop technologically, it will become
increasingly imperative that parents take an active role in their child's upbringing and education
in order to circumvent the development of a nationwide epidemic of introverted individuals.

The quality of a teacher lies not only within their knowledge of a subject, but also in their
ability to inspire their students to achieve a level above learning: application. Mr. Garbrecht's
innate ability to inspire his students has driven him to success within his classroom. His never-
ending enthusiasm for teaching is evident every day by the constant echo of laughter that can be
heard emanating from behind his classroom door. In fact, as I walked out of his classroom at the
end of the day, Mr. Garbrecht stated, "It's how I make them learn—I make myself laugh." I consider myself one of the lucky few at Stagg High School who had the opportunity to take a class with Mr. Paul Garbrecht. Although he cannot foresee where his life's journey will take him ten, twenty, or even thirty years from now, I envision him standing in front of the classroom next to the thirty foot projection of his presentation slides, enlightening the future generations about America's past, present, and future.

Works Cited


“Brown V. Board of Education.” Landmark Supreme Court Cases. 13 Mar. 2007  


