

“Remembering”

with Ryan Wilensky

“I met kids I never would’ve known and I’m richer for it.” Steve “Brownie” Brown first came to camp in 1957. As the 9-year-old son of camp legend Manny, he was “snuck in” prior to his 10th birthday, the starting age in those days. Coming to the West End House Camp was “the only thing I wanted to do,” said Steve. His dad Manny used to take him to the West End House Club on Blossom St. in the old West End of Boston, so he already knew all the guys. Back then, there were 3 2-week sessions for the West Enders and only a few spots for suburban kids. Spots were competitive, but Steve got in. He grew up in Framingham, then moved to Brighton where “9 of my best 11 friends went to West End.” From 1957-1968, Steve Brown attended camp every year except for the year he struggled with his Spanish courses at Bates College and took 2 courses over that summer. He was a camper, High Senior Captain, CIT, Junior Counselor, Senior Counselor and Color War coach (2-1 record). He met tons of lifelong friends including Richie Wynn, Bobby Gordon, Gerry Feld, Freddie London, Malcolm Alter, Joe Kaplan, Frankie Jackman and several others including his idol, Ralph Santosuosso. Keith Sherman, Michael Berger, and Peter Kaplan were some of his campers. “Great people, great athletes.”

It’s impossible to tell the story of Steve Brown’s time at West End without first talking about his dad Manny, who will be 100 years old come May 30th. Before Manny was 10 years old, his friend, Lee Romanow, brought Manny to the West End House Club, promising Manny’s parents that he would hold his hand on the walk there. For the cost of a nickel, Manny became a club member and was therefore automatically qualified to go to camp. Manny became a regular at camp, then as a young adult he fought in World War 2. While training in England, Manny was awakened in the middle of the night and without warning he was on a boat to Normandy, France (D-Day). Manny saw dead bodies lying on the beach and after his lieutenant and captain were killed, Sergeant Brown (who was in charge of phone communication), and his regiment helped the United States take the beach from the Germans. Manny’s regiment had to be replenished 3 times in Europe because of the destruction they faced at the hands of the Germans. On only his 43rd day of combat, Manny suffered several shrapnel wounds in Saint-Lo, France. He was in a fox hole with a friend who escaped unscathed and it was shocking he survived. After he was taken back to London, a minister said to him, “Well son, you made it.” The wounded soldier took a boat back across the Atlantic and needed a full year to recover. Because of the severity of his wounds, he was determined to be 300% disabled when he came back. Not wanting to be a burden to his family, Manny took Jack Burnes up on his offer to spend that summer at camp to relax and recover. Manny not only recovered but became a successful salesman and co-founded “Harper W. Poulson Inc.” specializing in engraving and office supplies. His son Steve took over after he retired. Manny Brown is both an American and West End House legend. Thank you, Manny, for your service to both.

Steve, however, did not love camp initially. He was so homesick, cried all the time, and missed his dog. Counselor, Arthur Geller, decided to take young Steve for a walk to Kennards to the then convenient store. He bought him bubble gum and chocolate and Steve was all set after that. 37 years after Steve Brown’s first year at camp, an unfamiliar, tall, older, long haired man walked into the Rec Hall while I, Ryan, was alone shooting the basketball during Rec Hall duty. He spent 30 minutes teaching me how to properly shoot the basketball. In what seemed like a religious experience, he then walked out without me knowing who he was. I had no idea who he was at the time. It turned out to be Arthur Geller, the same man who saved West End for young Steve Brown with some sweets. As Steve said, “He lives for OTHER people.” Indeed!

Steve loved all camp sports, but especially the individual ones like Boxing (in the Council Ring). He had to box the same 3-4 big kids all summer, every summer, and lost all of his matches to Stu Kawadler and most to Allen Summers. "They were both lefties who I couldn't figure out." Boxing was part of Color War in those days and one time, Steve got the worst of an accidental head collision. "It had to be the only knockout in Color War History. No hospital trip either." I asked Steve if he was embarrassed, but Steve Brown is not the type of man that gets embarrassed by defeat. He pointed out, "another benefit of WEHC, learning to compete, how to win and how to lose."

When asked what his favorite meal was, without hesitation, Brownie said, "Tuna Fish and Fries, Friday Night." One stormy evening in the Mess Hall, a plane made an emergency landing on the pond on one such Friday Night. "We brought the pilot and his crew into the Mess Hall for dinner." It's unclear if they stayed for Cake and Milk.

Steve's favorite memory at camp was not of himself, but of his son Noah (Gottlieb 1991). Noah had to attend a Lacrosse camp and Steve drove his son to camp afterwards for his CIT year. Ready to leave, Bill Margolin asked Steve if he could stay over. Steve jumped at the chance, especially because that evening there was the "House Game" vs. Robin Hood. Robin Hood was led by Michael Brewer, who ended up playing for Oak Hill Academy (alumni including Carmelo Anthony, Rajon Rondo, Kevin Durant) and Arizona State University. "He had like 37 points and Noah was guarding him tight." The clock was winding down with West End hanging to a close lead and "Noah stuffed him!"

Noah met Brent "BJ" Smith (Gottlieb 1990), another Brookline High student, while at West End. BJ (who sadly passed away in 2009) suggested to Noah that he throw shotput in high school. After BJ won the Eastern Mass State championship, Noah followed in his footsteps and finished 2nd his senior year. Noah won the Doug Flutie award for excellence in athletics and academics in the Bay State Conference. He was a terrific football player, like his dad Steve, who played offensive and defensive line for Bates College after graduating Boston Latin School. After college, Steve went on to play Rugby for 10 years for the Beacon Hill Rugby Football Club. At the age of 72, Steve has a positive, gentle spirit, but still looks strong enough to execute an open field tackle on demand.

Steve's funniest memory was the time he and a group took a hike around the lake. He ran into a wasp's nest and was stung about 10 times. "The waterfront director, Paul Renfrew, put mud on my wounds and said, 'You are fine'." They kept walking. It was a different time. He also remembered buying a 2 door Ford Falcon from his friend's mother, for \$50 and brought it to camp. On nights off, "The heater wouldn't shut off. We roasted the entire summer."

Like everyone, Steve is a huge admirer of Bill Margolin. "One of the kindest, most thoughtful people I've ever known. Wonderful guy. Great understanding of humans. Love the guy."

"West End House Camp gave me confidence." Steve used to be thrilled to run into his heroes like Izzy Kaplan on Comm. Ave or Tony LoVuolo in the North End. "It was like running into an NBA star." He does not get to Old Timers week often as it always coincides with a yearly family trip to Canada. But when he does, he says its "always the people" that bring him back. "Just an amazing time in my life. I learned, not everyone looks or thinks like me and there is something great about everyone." He loved everyone there. "It was heaven." Thank you, Steve Brown for "Remembering" West End with me. While there is no longer a general store near Kennards, next time we have a homesick new camper, I will keep in mind the simple tactics of Arthur Geller, "bubble gum and chocolate."