

Note: The following poem was read as part of a tribute to Bill Stapp during the opening of the NAAEE Annual Conference in Little Rock.

***Bill Stapp Remembered—NAAEE Conference, October 2001***

For those of you who didn't know Bill Stapp  
And for those who knew him quite well  
We want to pay tribute and share some thoughts  
For his is a story we simply must tell

There are many milestones in his long career  
And accomplishments about which we will crow  
They were founded on a kind and most caring soul—  
He was an extraordinary person whom we want you to know

Bill was characterized by passion and unfailing hope,  
A positive outlook, and energy to spare  
He was tolerant and patient, courageous and strong  
A friend and a mentor, unique among rare

So let's go back to the fifties and the start of the story  
The lessons of which you are free to surmise  
Join us for this moment as we try to describe  
A man who, admittedly, description defies

If ever you've wondered what laid the foundation  
Of one of our field's most illustrious careers  
Bill would say his great love of nature awakened  
With the tidepools he explored in his high school years

As a U of M student, he earned three degrees  
Then moved on to a role with the schools  
Where he took Ann Arbor students outside to study  
At a time when such action stretched all the rules

He taught at the Cranbrook School for Boys  
Then with Audubon in Dayton and Maine  
All the time starting to make the connections  
To see people and nature as links of a chain

Cranbrook and Audubon kindled Bill's love for birds  
So that every car trip, van ride, or walk  
Was made joyful by Bill's glee in sighting and teaching us  
Every bird song, nuthatch, vireo...chickadee, woodpecker, sandpiper, and hawk!

To the University of Michigan, Bill went to teach

And to begin the work for which he's best known  
He focused on root causes of environmental issues and  
Helped people solve problems in communities their own

Education, Bill felt, was not all it could be  
Connections, he thought, lacked recognition  
So Bill coined the phrase we now use every day  
And wrote environmental education's first definition

He said learning should happen across disciplinary borders  
And challenged the day's prevailing notions  
He made attitudes and action a part of the mix  
And set a new approach to education in motion

In collaboration with other great leaders and thinkers  
He laid the foundation from which our field grew  
His dedication and vision should long be acknowledged  
For those times set the tone for the work we now do

Bill's sense of community was both local and global  
He brought diverse groups together to find common ground  
He was always inclusive, respected all views  
And remained steadfast that solutions could always be found

With his global perspective and collaborative skill  
Bill was named UNESCO's first EE chief  
In charge of developing a worldwide program,  
UNESCO's first ever to earn unanimous belief

Tbilisi was the site of the historic meeting  
Where delegations agreed on objectives and goals  
For the emerging field of environmental education  
That were accepted by the world as a whole

The spirit of Tbilisi remains strong today  
Though we still struggle to find the field's name  
But a testament to Bill and his partnership building  
EE's framework remains essentially the same

In the mid 1970s Bill's UNESCO term ended  
And he returned to his Michigan post  
With all he inspired and all who inspired him  
His students probably benefited the most

For the richness of vision, the diverse points of view  
Expanded his thinking even more

Reaching urban populations, crossing cultural bounds  
Were now the concepts knocking on Bill's EE door

Around this time, Bill turned his attention  
To national efforts to build EE's name  
He took leadership roles within then NAAEE  
And encouraged his students to all do the same

Bill served on the board and was president  
And chaired the conference in Lake Louise  
He initiated the group's international expansion  
Amidst the beauty of Canada's lakes and trees

NAAEE became North American  
Reflecting Bill's unifying hope  
This unique conference quality remains today and  
The organization's enriched by its international scope

Bill continued to work 'round the world  
And consulted with 120 nations  
To forge common bonds and broker connections  
And build a base for environmental education

As a pioneer in developing action research  
Bill believed in hearing each person's voice  
He developed empowering curriculum models  
Based on individual and group student choice

Bill emphasized community problem-solving skills  
Including instruction, advocacy, and communication  
He believed in listening and healthy debate  
He defined all this as environmental education

If ever you had a conversation with Bill  
It's most likely that you heard him say  
That 80 percent of the world's diseases  
Are carried in the earth's waterways

It was this that drove Bill to focus  
His energy on the watershed theme  
Starting with testing on Michigan waters  
And evolving into a network called GREEN

Bill saw the root causes in watershed problems  
Inequities based on money, ethnicity, and race  
Understanding these interrelated issues was key

So for education as solution he made a convincing case

Underlying his passion for eliminating disease  
Was a deep concern for world peace  
With cultural understanding and inequities addressed  
He believed with full heart that all conflict could cease

Through the dedicated efforts of all those involved  
GREEN numbers 130 countries in its ranks  
Phenomenally including both Palestine and Israel  
Where peace-seeking students monitor both Jordan River banks

Another such effort goes on in Korea  
Where the Han River joins South and North  
Bill's dream and his challenge was to use education  
To find common interests and let peace come forth

That Bill was the recipient of much recognition  
Probably comes as little surprise  
With hope unrelenting, perhaps the most fitting  
Was his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize

Yet when asked what accomplishment made him most proud  
Bill's answer was one that you might not expect  
It was building a community of students  
Where ideas were exchanged and there was mutual respect

Bill brought out the best in his students  
Seeing in them only the good  
With his unreserved faith in our abilities  
We found ourselves doing things we never thought we could

Despite his position and worldwide renown  
Bill was a leader without pretension  
He valued each person, he listened intently,  
And always gave 100 percent attention

Any story of Bill would be incomplete  
Without including his partner and wife  
For Gloria was there every step of the way  
Enabling the rich success of his life

It was in a fungi morphology class  
That Bill won over Gloria's heart  
Cementing his proposal with a gift of binoculars  
Giving their marriage a solid and birding-based start

A rare lung disease developed later in life  
That would debilitate most, but not Bill  
He exercised daily, played golf, and went birding  
And kept right on working with determination and will

A last project was birding in Washtenaw County  
His goal to see 200 species in all  
At last count he had listed two-thirty-one  
With a rare Carolina wren found by its call

With Gloria's support, Bill faced each day head on  
He had living life to the fullest down pat  
We think of him now, in the birding beyond  
Happily pursuing that yellow-breasted chat

Bill led by example, using humor and warmth  
He was giving of heart 'til the end  
He was unreservedly positive in his perspective on life  
And he was, above all, a super friend

A teacher to many, a mentor to more  
To all of us he gave so much  
By his vision, his passion, his commitment, his skill  
There are few in the room whose lives go untouched

So as you go forth and enjoy the conference  
Sharing ideas and making new plans  
Know that all that you do builds on Bill Stapp's foundation  
And carry on in the spirit of this very special man.

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*Written by Lori Mann with input from Jean MacGregor and Martha Monroe*