

# **LET NOTHING STAND IN YOUR WAY: IN MEMORY OF BRIAN RADER**

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Oklahoma State House of Representatives

When Brian Rader began his remarkable career at Northeastern State, he could not have envisioned the impact he would have on students, the university, the community, the state or the Political Science discipline. Although the specifics of his career were unique, in many ways his career was typical of its time and place.

Like James Hilton's fictional Mr. Chips, Rader entered the teaching profession with minimal qualifications. He left having risen to the highest levels of distinction within his sphere. He provided great service, changed lives and made a difference everywhere he went.

## **EARLY LIFE**

Brian Farmer Rader was born December 31, 1940 in Washington DC. He grew up in Denver CO, where he graduated from West High School. As a young child he survived polio (which might explain some his expressive grit). As a teen, again demonstrating an ability to see a long and arduous process to completion, he earned the distinction of Eagle Scout. He remained active in Scouting right up until his death. In fact, an emotionally shaken Scout leader spoke at his memorial and indicated he was scheduled to participate in a Scouting event a few weeks hence.

After high school he entered Colorado State University, earning a BA in 1964. In 1966 CSU issued its first MA in political science to Brian Rader. Later that year he moved to Tahlequah, OK and began his widely acclaimed 43 years of service to NSU.

## **TEACHING CAREER**

Armed with a Masters Degree, Rader was hired by NSU on a temporary contract as an instructor. The following year he received a permanent instructor's appointment. He did not become an assistant

professor until 1972. Having completed an MA and PhD at the University of Oklahoma in 1977, he was granted tenure and promoted to associate professor in 1978. In 1982 he earned the distinction of full professor.

When NSU built branch campuses he began teaching in Muskogee, Tulsa and Broken Arrow. The hours were grueling and included a lot of windshield time. NSU faculty were expected to teach 12 or 15 credits on the main campus and conduct night and weekend classes at the satellite campuses as overload. He frequently taught two courses in the summer. Over 15,000 students took classes from Rader.

As is typical of faculty at one of Oklahoma's regional universities, in recent years he taught 10 different courses. For many of those courses he was the only faculty member available. The courses covered a wide range of topics: from state and local government, to public administration, to political parties, to minority politics and current issues.

Role playing and simulations were a teaching technique frequently used by Rader. He regularly invited guest lecturers and encouraged student projects that involved interviewing people in the community. Rader wanted his students to experience the practical aspects of politics. He once wrote, "I believe my role is to guide students to apply political theory to real world situations so they can learn about the challenges that political and governmental professionals face in their daily routines." He said applying theory to everyday situations makes learning more meaningful and memorable.

His efforts at teaching practical politics were fruitful. A large number of state and local officials passed under his influence. In 2007, of 101 current members of the Oklahoma House of Representatives 13 were former students of Rader. The total number of former office holders, municipal and tribal office holders who sat under his tutelage is difficult to estimate.

Both students and peers honored his efforts. The Oklahoma Political Science Association awarded Brian Rader their Teacher of the Year award in 1995. In 2007 he was named NSU Student Government Association Faculty Member of the Year for Teaching.

## SERVICE TO THE UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY

As is typical of a long serving faculty member, Rader served the university in a variety of ways. He chaired the Department of

Political Science from 1982-1990. He served on many committees and was faculty advisor to various student groups including: Oklahoma Intercollegiate Legislature, Pi Sigma Alpha, College Democrats and College Republicans. He worked with NSU's entry year teacher program, mentoring teachers in Midway, Tulsa, Checotah, Union, Broken Arrow, Sallisaw, Pocola, and Bokoshe. He was president of the local and state conference of the American Association of University Professors and vice-president of Pi Delta Kappa.

An early member of the Oklahoma Political Science Association, Rader served as president in 1979. He faithfully participated in the annual meetings, helping to organize several of them at NSU. In 2009 he wrote two pieces that appeared in *Oklahoma Politics*, participated in a panel at the annual meeting and agreed to lead a project to construct a history of OPSA.

Rader's service extended well beyond the campus. He was both a dedicated teacher and a dedicated public servant. His career stood at the nexus of political science theory and political action. He practiced what he taught. He was in the truest sense of the word a public servant.

He was elected to Tahlequah's city council in 1985, serving until 1997. Elected again in 2001 he served until 2005. During the later stint he was president of the council and interim mayor. As a councilor he also served on the Tahlequah Hospital Board, the Eastern Oklahoma Development District Board and a host of other committees, taking his turn as chairman. Early in his career he was assigned oversight of the Tahlequah sanitation department. He took this assignment with pride and was featured in a news photo driving a garbage truck. His efforts helped create one of the first residential pick-up recycling programs in the state. He envisioned writing a book about his experiences on the city council.

In both 1980 and 2000 he worked with the US Census office in Muskogee. A classic Tocquevillian joiner, Rader was a member of both Rotary and Kiwanis. He was the Kiwanis local president and lieutenant governor for the Oklahoma-Texas district. His active participation in the community earned him the "Big T" award from the Tahlequah Chamber of Commerce. In 1995 he was awarded Faculty Member of the Year for Community Service at NSU. He was honored as a member of the Leadership Oklahoma class of 1997.

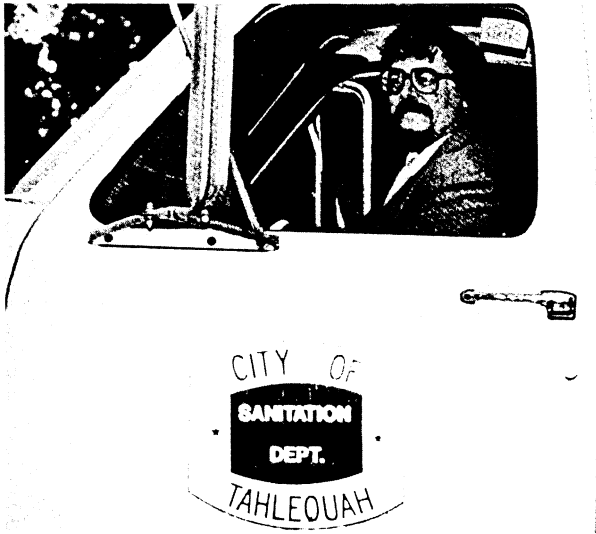


Photo Courtesy of Northeastern State University

## MEMORIES

Students remember Brian Rader for his wit and humor, for his infamous stories and distinctive laugh. He would frequently remark that a story he had just told was “a true story.” In class, he would say that there are many stories “some of which are true.” In the 1980s he often joked about rushing home to watch Little Rascals reruns on afternoon television. He would refer to students in the classroom as “Boss” after Boss JD Hogg from the Dukes of Hazard television series.

Jim Marrow of Tulsa Community College wrote, “I was in his class the first semester at NSU and also knew him at OU when he was finishing his degree. He was an unforgettable character. My late friend Hank Comby also had Brian and we always referred to him as Deputy Dog.”

Anyone who knew Brian Rader knew his distinct mannerisms. Aaron Mason of Northwestern recalls his tendency to fully extend his raised right arm in class and point directly toward a particular student in class as he was about to make an important point. If no one commented on the issue at hand, he would then say, “Well it may not make sense to you now, but undoubtedly it will come to you later tonight when you are

at Ned's". Of course Ned's was one of the favorite college bars in Tahlequah at that time. This was his way to interject humor and to emphasize his point.

A broken chair is another of Mason's memories. A student was giving a paper presentation in Seminary Hall before it was renovated. The furniture was very decrepit. "As the student was delivering his findings, I noticed that Dr. Rader who was sitting across the room from me seemed to be fidgeting in his chair which was one of these old decrepit desks. Then all of the sudden, and in the middle of this student's talk, the desk collapsed. When I say collapsed, I mean it was totally demolished. There was little left except splinters. At that point the room went silent. The only voice that was heard next was Dr. Rader who stated to himself in a loud and laughing tone, 'Well Brian, you did it again.' At that point the entire class erupted into hysterics and probably for 2 to 3 minutes people laughed themselves silly. I tell the story not only for its comic affect but also for its value into the insight of Dr. Rader's mind and that was that he did not take himself too seriously. Rather, he could have something so embarrassing happen to him and yet, he just laughed it off. I find that to be a refreshing quality that too few of us have."

Murray State College's Kirk Rodden recalls, "Anytime he cracked a joke in class and there was little by way of response from the bleary eyed students he would always remark 'there's no humor here.'" Rodden notes the small world of Oklahoma political science. Early in his career he attended a meeting where "Several people in the room had either gone to school together or to each other." Dr. Harry Holloway was there, Rader had been Holloway's student and Rodden Rader's student. (Note: I was Rodden's classmate in Rader's courses at NSU and later Holloway's student at OU.) This is one more indication of the common path Rader illustrates and we all share.

Loren Gresham, president of Southern Nazarene University wrote, "We were classmates, took several courses together, studied for General Exams over several months together. He was a truly unique person who loved his discipline and particularly enjoyed talking about the phenomena related to politics. It was sometimes difficult to stay focused on our studies as his fertile mind would get on various sidetracks that would consume time from our subject matter. In all that, he was an instigator, a stimulator of ideas and perspectives that made those times rich in my memory. Occasionally I would see him again at a professional

meeting or in conferences around the state or region. It was as if no time had lapsed since our graduate school days. He was a true friend, a colleague, a genuine and good man. I cherish his memory.”

According to the University of Central Oklahoma’s Randal Jones, “Brian was a prime example of an effective applied political scientist for whom scholarship and public service appeared to be equally important and complementary.” Jones notes the famous picture of Rader driving the garbage truck saying, “Yes, Virginia, there really are public officials who ride in garbage trucks!”

“He has had an impact on my life that I consider to be significant and taught me the value of active participation in the political process,” wrote Owasso’s city manager Rodney Ray. “...Dr. Rader has brought to his classroom an excitement and energy that has resulted in intellectual growth and the improvement of his student’s ability to think in expanded terms. I personally know several of his former students that attribute their success in business and government to this tutorial skills and willingness to fire an excitement for service to the public”

Kim Cherry, interim president at NSU wrote, “He has contributed to the education and enrichment of our student body beyond compare. He is truly one of those individuals who has made Northeastern State University a better place for all.”



Photo Courtesy of Northeastern State University

My own memories are of a mentor who pushed me and encouraged me to reach beyond. He often told us (his students) we were limited only by our own imaginations. In the early 1980s when I was an aspiring Republican and he was a very active Democrat, he agreed to become my faculty advisor because our academic interests were so similar. We both became “roving registrars” for the county election board and conducted voter registration drives together in the Tahlequah High School cafeteria. When I decided to explore a PhD program, he said, “If you have figured out what you want to do in life, by all means do it and let nothing stand in your way, because I submit to you that 9 out of 10 people have not figured it out.” Those simple but profound words became my inspiration to complete the marathon that is a PhD.

We kept in touch over the years. He was a proud man. He was proud of his kids and bragged on them anytime anyone would listen. He was proud of his wife Debby, constantly updating me on her remarkable career in the public schools. She was one of the first teachers in Oklahoma to receive National Board Certification. At his urging she became active in politics, serving on the Oklahoma Education Association Board of Directors and Political Action Committee. She says he taught her everything she needed to be successful in politics. He was proud of his students, those in faculty positions and those in public office. He was proud of me and he regularly let me know.

In the last year of his life I was privileged to coauthor a piece with him that appeared in *Oklahoma Politics*. He told me frequently how pleased he was with that article. I tell everyone who will listen, “If you have not written a paper with your undergraduate mentor call them up and suggest a topic. You will cherish the memories.”

The last conversation I had with him, he called the Capitol to ask me for a copy of a legislative bill. He was engaged in a coffee shop discussion on campus and wanted to have the document. When I returned his call, he recognized my phone number and answered, “JD Hogg here.” Of course, anyone who has read his dissertation or knows his political career is well aware that he loved sarcasms and hated racism.

#### A TYPICAL OKLAHOMA CAREER

Brian Rader’s career spanned 6 decades from the 1960s to the 2010s. His career took on many of the characteristics that were common to its time. He began college teaching with an MA. He earned his PhD

while teaching a full load of classes, fulfilling his responsibilities on campus, raising a family, and participating in community activities. He earned teaching and service awards at the university. More importantly, he earned tenure and promotion. Ultimately, he became a full professor and one of the pillars on which the university stood. He was a fixture in the state political science association.

He was active in his community. He joined several service clubs and became active in politics. In many of those clubs he eventually served a term or two as president. In the city he became a city councilman, chairman of several boards, and mayor. His reputation grew regionally and statewide. His career as a public servant and as a political scientist were inexorably intertwined.

Rader was an uncommon man, but his career illustrates that of many Oklahoma political scientists in the 1960s. He reached the pinnacle of his profession within his sphere. In 2007 the Oklahoma Legislature recognized his achievements with a citation. In 2009 to commemorate the university's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary he was named an NSU Centurion.

Many of us will simply remember him as our friend.