

BROCK'S BANTER: Unlocking the student

By Brock Weir

Then there was that moment you knew was coming.

Everyone else had gone before you. They had all the answers. They were quick on the button. No hesitation.

You probably wouldn't have hesitated either as the questions were so inconsequential.

What's your favourite TV show?

What's your favourite song?

What's your favourite band?

They are, of course, questions you could answer with the snap of your fingers.

They are questions I too could answer with the snap of my own fingers. Now.

But that wasn't always the case.

It was Grade 9 and for reasons which are still unclear to me, this questionnaire get-to-know-you exercise was the ice breaker in our information technology class.

It wasn't an ordinary ice breaker ? there was a kicker. You might think that once we completed the questionnaire, we would have to stand up and read them to the class, or submit them to the teacher. Those seem like two pretty reasonable scenarios, but you would be wrong. Not only did we have to fill them out, but we had to pass them to our neighbour, who then scrutinized our answers before they had to stand up and read the answers on our behalf.

This time, when it came to my answers, my particular neighbour, Andrew, already had a running start. He provided them.

Grade 9 is a particularly difficult time for any student looking to fit in and I was no exception. I certainly, at that time, didn't want people to know my favourite TV show at that point in time was I Love Lucy. Nor did I want them to know that my favourite song at the time was something 30 or 40 years removed from the Top 40, or that my mind went completely blank when trying to think up a band that anyone in my class was likely to be familiar with.

So, after a prompt, Andrew filled in the blanks: Spin City became my favourite TV show, Blink-182 my band, and although I can't remember what song he suggested to fill in the middle blank, I'm relatively sure it was a solid choice. So, when he stood up to read my (his) answers I kept my fingers crossed there wouldn't be a snicker in the audience.

It was a total sham, but as long as they bought it, and I could go another day without a tease, it was all worth it in the end.

That was the overall theme of my Grade 9 year, but the following year was comparatively smooth sailing ? and I chalk a lot of that up to Reg O'Brien.

To some of you in Aurora and Newmarket, Reg's name is probably a familiar one. Actively involved in the local arts scene, chances are you've seen his name ? and probably his face ? in these pages as an active member of Theatre Aurora who has graced the stage itself as well as worked his magic behind the scenes as well.

I didn't know this side of him until I joined The Auroran back in 2009; before that, he was simply Mr. O'Brien.

Over the course of my time at Newmarket High School, I had the pleasure of being in several of his classes, the first one being an introduction to media studies.

When I walked through his classroom door, I sensed there was something a little bit different going on. Not that they would be out of place in a media studies classroom, I was particularly struck by walls covered in movie posters covering the so-called 'Golden Age' of film to the present day.

At the front of the room was a thin man with a very unique face and smile.

It was soon clear he was tough but fun, a winning combination for any teacher, but, again, there was something more.

Eventually, I found myself very comfortable in his class, particularly compared to the other courses I had been taking and, after a time, I was so comfortable that I let my guard down.

It was just blurted out. I was a fan of I Love Lucy, of old films, of classic music and, you know what, he was too and he took ownership of it right there in front of the class, going into pretty significant detail a scene from the film Now, Voyager.

In the middle of the conversation, he mentioned offhand one of the highlights of his youth was going to see a taping of The Mary Tyler Moore Hour, MTM's ill-fated follow-up series to her smash hit of the same name. Needless to say, I was enthralled.

Although I took slight umbrage in the fact he didn't particularly care for the episode he saw (nor the series, along with most of the North American populace) he scored some serious street cred in my book.

After that, I felt ever so slightly more comfortable in my own skin amongst my peers. I didn't feel the need to put that façade back

up. It was time to take ownership of who I was, what I liked, damned the consequences.

And, you know what? At that age I was stunned to find out that there were no consequences whatsoever.

By the time I had him the next year for English, there was no turning back and we had a great rapport, comparing notes on our uniquely shared interests, getting into heated but respectful discussions on various points in the lesson plan ? such as my contention that, if staged in just the right way, the Fool could be a complete figment of King Lear's withering sanity ? and on and on it went. This relationship went on a hiatus after graduating Grade 12, but I was delighted they were renewed in a different capacity once I had joined the paper and we reconnected through Theatre Aurora.

We picked up right where we left off, eventually connecting over Facebook to a point where we exchanged Bette Davis and Joan Crawford memes on a regular basis, a practice which hit fever pitch earlier this year when those two ladies were being explored in the FX miniseries Feud.

I'm just sorry I never bothered to say any of the last 1,000-odd words to Reg himself before I learned of his untimely death last week.

Although I never expressed the fact that he helped me access some of the tools I have within myself to actually be who I am, I like to think that he knew that as he saw me come out of my shell, and I like to think he activated that elusive part of the brain in the hundreds of students he impacted over his lengthy teaching career. Maybe you are one of them.

Thanks, and godspeed.