

# The “Health Educator’s Health Educator:” An Interview with Loren B. Bensley, Jr., Ed.D.

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## Interviewer’s Notes

*I drive up to the farm, a 130-year old homestead located on the Leelanau Peninsula along the northern shores of Lake Michigan. It is December, and the farm is alive with the traditions and spirit of Christmas. Being a member of the family, I know Loren, or “Pap” as he is affectionately known by the family, is hard at work making gifts to share with his loved ones on Christmas Eve. Our family has found the act of making gifts for each other and sharing them on the most blessed night of the year taps our souls into the true meaning of the season. So it is no wonder that, as I drove up the drive, Loren emerged from the barn, home for his wood working tools and workshop. “Hey buddy, welcome home.” I got out of the car, shared a hug, and followed him into the house, where mom had put on a fresh pot of coffee. A wonderful home with a living soul. I asked him what he was working on in the barn. “Just helping Justin (Loren’s grandson, my nephew) with some Christmas gifts.” “Is this a good time for the interview, Pap?” He responded by saying “Sure. You know any time’s a good time for a discussion about health ed.” And so it begins . . .*

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## The Interview

Bob: Pap, I want to thank you for doing this interview. As you know, I have been looking forward to this ever since Mark (Kittleson) contacted me about interviewing you. Also as you already know, you have always been my mentor, both professionally and personally. Your role modeling is probably the primary factor that influenced me to enter the field of health education.

Loren: Thanks Bob. As *you* know, I am proud to be interviewed by you and to have you as my son as well as a colleague in the profession of health education. This experience for me is extremely satisfying and something that I have tried to take seriously. First of all, to be considered a “legend” in the profession is something I never dreamed of and, secondly, to have my own son, who is an accomplished health educator in his own right, interview me for this article is almost unbelievable. The answers to your questions will represent my beliefs and what I stand for.

As you know, I have been committed to two things in my adult life. First and foremost is my family, which is the most important to me, and secondly my profession, which I have pursued with passion and satisfaction. As my career came to an end, I thought a lot about what I personally wanted to leave with. Three things constantly came to my mind when I gave this consideration. First is to retire with dignity—to know in my own mind that I have upheld the values and virtues of teaching and the profession. Secondly is respect. Respect for myself as well as from my students and colleagues. The third is satisfaction. Satisfaction in knowing I have accomplished personal and professional goals and have no regrets. If somewhere along the line I made a difference in the lives of young people, intensifies the feeling of satisfaction.

Bob: So you are a health educator. What does that mean?

Loren: A health educator is an individual who has the power to influence others through the process of education. This

basically means the skills to assess and diagnose health problems, identify risks that cause these problems, and plan strategies that can be delivered to individuals that will increase their knowledge and motivate them to change their health behaviors. Being a health educator also means that you belong to a profession of committed individuals who believe in improving the health of the nation through the process of education. Health educators are good people who are enjoyable to associate with and to have, not only as colleagues, but as friends as well.

Bob: Who had the greatest influence on you in becoming a health educator and why?

Loren: By about the fourth grade I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. At that time I didn't know what I wanted to teach or at what grade level. As I grew, I was influenced by my grandfather who was a country doctor in Northern Michigan and by my father who was a hospital administrator. When I was a freshman in college, I took a personal health course from an outstanding professor. His interest and enthusiasm in health education encouraged me to minor in health education at the undergraduate level. Also at the undergraduate level, I was greatly influenced by Frank Myers, a young professor who had just received his doctorate from Indiana University. He later became my Department Chairman when I came back to Central Michigan University (my undergraduate institution) to teach. In graduate school, Donald Boydston from Southern Illinois University influenced me a great deal and encouraged me to pursue my educational interests. My doctoral studies at Boston University introduced me to Carl Willgoose, whose command of the profession helped me in establishing a philosophical base for teaching and research.

Bob: Who were your mentors and role models?

Loren: At the undergraduate level, I was greatly influenced by Dr. Frank Myers, who was a very caring individual and dedicated to the profession and teaching. Frank had a wonderful personality that exemplified a caring attitude and friendliness. I remember sitting in his classroom and wishing someday that I could be just like him. Later, I was fortunate to work under his guidance when I was a young instructor in the Department of Health Education at CMU. Frank's involvement in the profession, as well as his constant commitment to learning, helped guide me in my professional endeavors. He was also an excellent role model from the standpoint of being a husband, father, and family man. Often he would say, no job, promotion, research, class, or student is more important than your family. Not only did he tell us this, he exemplified this in his own behavior.

As a master's student I was influenced by Don Boydston, who also demonstrated a very likeable personality and high professional standards. Like Frank Myers, he was a very caring and sensitive individual who truly cared for his students. His mentoring reinforced that which I learned from Frank Myers regarding professional commitment and high professional standards.

As a doctoral student, I was mentored by Carl Willgoose from Boston University. From Carl, I saw being demonstrated, once again, a high degree of professionalism, an open and friendly personality, and a commitment to his family. I also learned from Carl the importance of research as well as the obligation to publish. All three of these mentors also had a common denominator—they were excellent classroom teachers. This I admired. Their enthusiasm in the classroom, as well as their knowledge of content and

the profession, greatly influenced me in developing my own teaching style and approach to students. Also, all three of these individuals were compassionate and kind to their students and their colleagues. Finally, they all had a wonderful sense of humor, which made them enjoyable to learn from and to be with.

In my professional career, I was greatly influenced by Warren Schaller, who possessed all of the qualities the previous three had plus the skill and ability to be a professional leader. He was well organized and had the ability to lead in a compassionate, yet firm way. Whenever people worked with Warren, they always felt good about what they were doing and about themselves. He had the unique ability to make a person feel important and successful. He also was committed to helping individuals become recognized for their accomplishments. If there's anything I learned from Warren, it's how to work with people and lead in a positive way.

Bob: How can their wisdom be used today in preparing new health educators?

Loren: The wisdom of these role models can be used in three ways: (1) they were compassionate about their profession, (2) they were dedicated to the classroom, and (3) they all had an excellent way of working and getting along with people. It's probably not so much the wisdom of these individuals, but the type of individuals they were in regard to their personalities, their philosophies, and their quest to live life to it's fullest.

Bob: If I were a new health educator, what would you tell me?

Loren: The first thing I would say is that you chose an honorable profession. You are a colleague among a group of individuals who are caring, intelligent, and enjoyable to be with.

You need to practice your craft with a high degree of professionalism. This includes upholding the standards of the profession and being ethical in your personal and professional life.

You need to believe in what you do and take pride in your efforts, and, as a result, you will be successful. At the same time, you need to also be ready to accept criticism. No matter what you do, there will be times when someone will criticize your efforts. In trying to deal with this criticism, always remember if you say nothing or if you do nothing, then you will be nothing.

Be willing to accept a challenge. In other words, take professional risks to pursue your professional and personal goals. If you do this, it will take a commitment of your time, skills, and energies that will be rewarding to you as you see personal challenges and goals become a reality.

Always keep in perspective your role as a professional, spouse, parent, and/or individual. Never allow your work as a health educator to become more important than becoming an individual or assuming the role of spouse or parent. If you are a dedicated professional, this will be one of your major challenges.

Never stop learning. Your formal education only serves as a foundation for further knowledge and experience. Keep in touch with what is going on in the profession by reading the professional journals and going to seminars, conferences, and conventions.

Walk your talk. In other words, be a role model for that which you advocate. The old adage "I can't hear what you're saying because of what I see" has a great deal of truth.

Become professionally involved. I probably learned more through professional involvement with associations and organizations than I did

- from all of my formal training at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
- Finally, strive for success. Set reasonable and obtainable goals, both personal and professional, and work toward these with a commitment and passion to be the best you can be.
- Bob: If I were a seasoned health educator, what would you tell me?
- Loren: You have an obligation to help young professionals. You have the experience, the knowledge, and the connections to help young professionals grow and establish themselves as health educators and health promotion specialists.
- You have an obligation to share ideas and successes with the profession.
- Always strive for perfection and continue to be creative in your work.
- When you become cynical and start to complain, or when you've lost your passion to be a health educator, hang it up. Some individuals spend the last few years of their lives complaining and looking forward to retirement. As a result, their productivity diminishes and their attitude is difficult to live with.
- Bob: If I were a retired health educator, what would you tell me?
- Loren: Look back on your accomplishments with satisfaction and pursue new or old interests without deadlines or demands. I guess the one thing that we should strive to do is to retire with no regrets. If we can do that, we are on our way to one of the most enjoyable stages of life—retirement.
- Bob: How do you work with those who are less dedicated to the field than you? What kept you going?
- Loren: This can be the most difficult and frustrating experience in working with colleagues. Unfortunately, some professionals lack motivation or are

- burned out. To work with these individuals is frustrating. However, finding a mutual interest, which might capitalize on that person's talents, may motivate the individual. Secondly, there needs to be opportunities (i.e. financial, time, and colleague and institutional support) provided for the individual to do what he or she perceives worthwhile. Next, the person has to be able to set reasonable goals that can be accomplished. When individuals pursue an interest, they should be positively reinforced and respected. Finally, holding individuals accountable to what they said they would do may motivate them to persevere with their interest.
- The answer to the second question, what kept me going?, is simple. I enjoyed what I was doing and believed in my students. Also, involvement at the state, national, and international levels was challenging and rewarding. Finally, the friendship of colleagues was highly valued and appreciated.
- Bob: How do we, as health educators, get "out of the box."
- Loren: Early in one's career, even in the professional preparation programs, there should be opportunities for individuals to learn about other professions, and give them experiences in identifying needs and planning health promotion programs by working with health care providers, sociologists, psychologists, social workers, etc. As a result, when they become practitioners, they will know how to work with other professions in delivering a more specified and concentrated effort for health education.
- Bob: You always say it is important to "keep your shoes polished, have a firm handshake, and take pride in your work." How did you develop this philosophy and what does it mean?
- Loren: Each of these three things has a meaning. The first part, which is to

“keep your shoes polished,” refers to the personal appearance and image that one portrays to others. One who has polished shoes is often times a polished individual. One’s appearance often leads to one’s self-confidence and respect. My father used to say “you are no better than you look.” For some reason that always had a big impact on me and I found when one is well kept, it gives them an attitude of confidence and pride. The second statement, “have a firm handshake” relates to one’s character. A firm handshake indicates strength in a person’s moral and ethical behavior, which includes their virtues and values and ability to overcome adversity. “Take pride in what you do” is rather self-evident. In order to “take pride in what you do,” it is necessary to anticipate the consequences of your actions. If these actions are morally right, provide satisfaction, and provide the opportunity for you to do your best, the end result will be pride in your attempt and accomplishments.

I have always tried to pass on these three things—keep your shoes polished, have a firm handshake, and take pride in your work—to my children and my students.

Bob: What ideas do you have, pertaining to health education, that were never pursued? Why or why not?

Loren: There are three or four things that I never pursued for a variety of reasons. Mainly these reasons were because others couldn’t see a need or the relevance of the idea, there was a lack of time and money, or, later in my career, I realized I didn’t have the time to pursue the idea or interest to make it become a reality. Now, what were these ideas? One was the concept of a master’s degree that would be offered by a consortium of universities with a major share of the program being delivered through distance learning technology. This, I believe, should still be done and is on the

cutting edge of the delivery of professional preparation in health education. I can see this as becoming a state, regional, national, or even international effort.

A second idea was the formation of a National Academy of Health Education, which would serve as a national think tank. This would consist of a group of the most experienced and the finest minds in health education, representing both theory and practice. In addition, there would be a select group of graduate students who would participate. This group would meet periodically to pursue pertinent current and future issues of the profession.

The third idea was to work with two other professions, health psychology and health communications, in sharing knowledge and experience as well as joint academic degrees. There is a large overlap between health psychology, health communication, and health education/promotion, as well as individual differences, when shared and combined can accomplish our common goal of healthier individuals and, thus, a healthier nation.

Bob: Where have we, as a profession, erred in the past? What can we learn from that?

Loren: I think, as a profession, we have erred by practicing health education without using a theoretical base. Way too much health education has been conducted in classrooms and communities without utilizing the knowledge we have pertaining to how people learn, understanding personalities and human behavior, and utilizing strategies that, not only inform, but motivate individuals to change. The absence of the application of theory to practice has been a professional tragedy. Too many health educators have attempted to educate people without having in mind any attainable objectives or by using

inappropriate materials and methods. Too many school health educators teach the way they were taught, not how they were taught to teach. Another error we have made is that we have never taken time to evaluate our efforts. Ask many health educators what effect they had on a group or individuals by delivering their message and you will always get the same answer—they don't know. A third error we have made is in our professional preparation programs where we overemphasize specific health content at the sacrifice of health education process. After all, this is what gives us our identity. This is what makes us different from other allied health professions. We have the knowledge and skills to educate individuals based on human behavior and the psychology of learning. We also have the ability to assess needs, plan programs, and evaluate—all based on theoretical models. This knowledge and skill has not been used enough in the practice of health education, and, as a result, much of what we do is ineffective. What can we learn from this? It's obvious that we need to prepare individuals in the theory of health education, as well as provide them with the time and resources necessary to put theory into practice.

Bob: What is the future of health education?

Loren: The future of health education has always been great. I guess this is partially due to the fact that we have always had, and will continue to have, health problems caused by the behaviors of individuals. Although many health problems have been eliminated through scientific means, the behavior of individuals is unpredictable and always will be a factor in one's health. In essence, we will always have health problems that can be prevented by educating people to live healthier lifestyles. I don't think we need to worry

about going out of business in the next 100 to 200 years.

Another factor that indicates we have a bright future is the recognition by health care providers of the importance of prevention. Over the past 10 to 20 years, we have seen the commitment of HMOs and individual practitioners in incorporating educational programs to help patients live healthier lifestyles and prevent disease and disorders.

Another factor that is encouraging is the federal government's recognition and involvement in committing resources, as well as initiating public policy that supports health education and health promotion.

The future is also influenced by the increasing acceptance of health education in the public schools. More teachers than ever before have been trained in health education. In addition, there are model curricula in health education that have been evaluated and shown to be successful.

Finally, the present and future use of electronic communications is, and will continue to be, influential in the delivery of health education and health promotion.

Bob: Where is credentialing going? Are we on the right path?

Loren: As a member of the original *Role Delineation Project*, I have always supported the credentialing process. I believe we are on the right path and great progress has been made. This progress, in its early stages, had to overcome insurmountable barriers. With the perseverance of a small group of professionals, we now have the credentialing process, which has been a credit to the profession. I do believe, however, the competencies and sub-competencies need to continually be reexamined and updated. We are moving

into the second decade of the standards that were developed several years ago, which may be outdated. In order to maintain the credibility of the credentialing process, we need to continually reexamine our standards from which individuals are credentialed.

Bob: Where do our allied health cousins fit in?

Loren: Our allied health cousins are all doing some form of health education or health promotion. This is being done from the perspective of their profession, which is usually scientific in nature. A perfect example is nurses who say they are doing health education, which, in actual fact, is a process of health information that they are dispensing to patients. There's definitely a role for these health professionals to do health education. However, they need to be educated as to what our unique skills and abilities are, which goes beyond the dissemination of information. We have the knowledge and skills of assessment, planning, delivery of educational programs using unique methods based on learning principles, and evaluation, which they have not been trained to do. Our role is to work with our allied health cousins in helping them become better disseminators of information and assist them in identifying needs and in planning and evaluating health promotion programs.

Bob: What are you the most proud of?

Loren: There are several things I am proud of that have given me a great deal of satisfaction. Being elected the President of the American School Health Association was a monumental part of my career. Working with professional associations and organizations was very satisfying, and I am proud of the leadership I may have given them in the various roles I served. Also, working with Eta Sigma Gamma has been a highlight of my career. Being a Chapter Sponsor at CMU for 12 years and

experiencing the success of that chapter is something I feel very fortunate to have been a part of. Furthermore, my involvement on the National Executive Committee of Eta Sigma Gamma as Historian and Director of Chapter Development has been very rewarding. Receiving a Teaching Excellence Award and Outstanding Professor Award from CMU was also something that gives me a feeling of accomplishment. My work in international health education was unique and exciting. Sharing this experience with students in conducting student travel courses to England and Scotland was probably one of the highlights of my teaching career. Last, but not least, the feeling of doing a good job in the classroom and walking out of a session knowing I gave it its full shot, provided a high that lasted for a long time.

Bob: If you were to do it all over again, would you do anything different? Why or why not?

Loren: The one thing that I would have done different is spent more time teaching in the public schools before moving on to higher education. This is by no means a serious regret. In actual fact, I have had a very enjoyable career and have accomplished more than I have ever dreamed of.

Bob: When all is said and done, did you make a difference? If so, to who and to what degree? How do you know that you made a difference?

Loren: I guess one would have to define "difference" in answering this question. If difference means making a difference in people's lives, I would hope this has been accomplished. If "difference" means that I have made a difference in the profession, I would say by participating in several different professional organizations, I hope that my contributions were of worth to

furthering the purposes and missions of those organizations. If “difference” means I may have made a difference in the professional preparation of students at CMU, I would say yes, as the curricula I developed for courses and the blueprint I laid for the professional preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels incorporated my beliefs. So I guess it’s how you define difference. Overall, I want to believe I have made a difference.

It is harder to determine “to what degree” these differences were. Like several of my colleagues, I have had students who have been kind enough to let me know that their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs have changed because of what we did in the classroom. To see students practicing what you taught in the classroom and what you encouraged them do as professionals is always rewarding and provides a degree of satisfaction that you may have been a part of their growth and development.

For the last question, “how do you know you are making a difference?,” I guess one has to admit there are a large percentage of individuals with whom you will never make a difference. However, those you have influenced will tell you, either directly or through their behavior, your presence in their lives has been meaningful.

One last note on this and that is, I have a son who is a professor of health education whom I am extremely proud of. Are you in the profession because your old man was a health educator? I don’t know. I like to believe that to a certain extent, you may have chosen the profession out of the joy and satisfaction I received.

Bob: You already know the answer to your last comment. I am one of the many who you touched. I just got the luck of the draw and had you as a lifelong personal and

professional mentor. As many would agree with me, you are far too humble in your answers. Now, knowing that you are always good for an additional comment or two, do you have any closing thoughts?

Loren: As a matter of fact, I do. I have had a wonderful career with a great deal of satisfaction, not necessarily because of my efforts, but because of those who have helped me along the way in providing me with the opportunity to grow as a professional and a person. The institutions I worked for, my Department Chairs and Deans, and my colleagues have all played a significant role in a satisfying and enjoyable career. Last, but not least, none of what I have done could have been accomplished without the understanding, love, advice, and guidance of my wife (Joey) and my children. There are many careers and professions I could have pursued and would have enjoyed, but I never would have had the wonderful life I have had without Joey, your brothers, sister, and you.

*And with that, the old man stands, we hug, he tells me that he loves me, and then trots back to Justin and the barn, where his work in teaching values and character to young minds isn’t yet finished.*

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