

A Tribute to Dr. Barry Flinchbaugh

By Michael Torrey

The agricultural world lost a giant last week, when Kansas State University professor Barry Flinchbaugh died at the age of 78.¹

I first encountered Dr. Flinchbaugh when I was a teenager. My grandmother, who worked at Kansas State, brought home copies of his speeches for me to read. I found them captivating. But they were a bit more than my 14-year-old mind could handle.

Those speeches were my ticket into his vaunted agricultural policy class as a sophomore at Kansas State. Historically, Dr. Flinchbaugh only admitted juniors into his class. But he gave me a pass after learning I'd been reading his work for years.

Whether I understood that work is an entirely different matter.

After our very first class together, Dr. Flinchbaugh took us all out for beer and held court -- answering questions, telling stories, and otherwise entertaining us. It was hard to believe that our owlish professor who always wore purple shirts was the dean of the agricultural policy community -- not just in Kansas but nationwide.

I idolized him. But sometimes young men express admiration for their role models by having fun at their expense. That was certainly the case for me. Dr. Flinchbaugh's high-pitched voice and unique speaking cadence gave me plenty of material for a brief stint as a class clown. The grade he gave me that semester indicated that he didn't find my act very funny.

Dr. Flinchbaugh and I became fast friends soon thereafter. He set me on the path toward a career in agricultural policy in Washington. And his insights are as relevant today as ever.

He was the intellectual godfather of "Freedom to Farm," the academic who pushed farmers to plant to the market and leave the old federal command-and-control model behind. His work led to a new world for production agriculture and revamped our nation's food supply chain.

I'll always remember his advice to find the kingmakers -- the people behind the scenes who guide decision-making at all levels of government and society. They could be the civic leaders, the pillars of a community who have the ears of local elected officials. They could be the sages within a government agency or trade group whose voices are always heard before a decision is made. These kingmakers are the ones he said we need to educate before we can effectively advocate.

His personal touch was legendary. I might call him for advice on some arcane issue of agricultural policy, and we'd instead spend 30 minutes talking about my daughter. Plenty of his other students can share similar stories.

¹ <https://www.kansas.com/news/business/agriculture/article246908577.html>

Dr. Flinchbaugh died doing what he loved -- teaching. Even in the midst of this awful pandemic, he made time to share his knowledge with the next generation of farmers and agricultural policymakers.

During our last conversation, Dr. Flinchbaugh and I spoke for an hour and a half. We talked about the importance of finding common ground not just in the agricultural community but in society at large. That counsel is apt this week, as the nation grapples with a closely contested election.

I will miss my old college professor. And there are countless friends, family members, and fellows in the agricultural policy community who will miss Dr. Barry Flinchbaugh, too.

Michael Torrey is principal and founder of Michael Torrey Associates.