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## THE DAILY SPLASH

# Jeffrey Breslow on finding (and becoming) a mentor

By JEFFREY BRESLOW May 27, 2013 7:16PM



Dr. Ed Zagorski and Jeffrey Breslow

Over the next few weeks, thousands of students across Chicago will be graduating. They'll be thinking about how they got to where they are, and where they're headed. For both the students looking ahead to this crossroads and the professionals looking back at it, there's no better time to consider the idea of mentorship.

It's relatively easy to reconstruct the ways in which our "selves" are the result of guiding forces like family, social pressures, genetics, nature, nurture, our dads' noses or our moms' senses of humor. A far more intriguing pursuit may be attempting to understand how we are shaped by — and how to connect with — people who can teach us how to achieve our dreams, dreams we sometimes don't even recognize. Mentors can change our lives. It's important that we all recognize this, push ourselves to learn from those around us — and teach those that ask for our help.

I'm a sculptor. For a long time before I embarked on this second career, I was a toy designer. Creativity has been central to my life and my work, but I'm most grateful to the mentors who stirred in me the belief that I could be my own guiding creative force.

I began college as an ambitionless 17-year-old freshman, drinking beer on my way to flunking out of Bradley University. While visiting friends at the University of Illinois in Urbana, somehow I was fortunate enough to wander into the new Art and Design Building. There, I met my greatest mentor.

I'd been lured into the building by a display of industrial-design student work, and the display captivated me. I didn't really know how or why, but I felt compelled to continue down the hall to the office of those students' instructor, Ed Zagorski. I knocked on his door.

Ed welcomed me and talked with me about industrial design for nearly 30 minutes. His passion for the art and science of industrial design was tangible. I left his office electrified and immediately threw myself into my studies at Bradley so that I could transfer as soon as possible to U. of I. and learn from Ed.

When I got to Ed's class a year later, it was pure joy. Ed supported his students with the loyalty, love and tenacity of a parent. It was through his teaching and care that I first began to recognize myself as a creator.

My next great mentor was legendary independent Chicago toy designer Marvin Glass. I'd heard about Marvin while I was an industrial design student at University of Illinois. It was a revelation to me that a toy-design studio like his actually existed. So I made it my mission to somehow become a part of his team.

Because Marvin saw something in me, he hired me just two years after I graduated from University of Illinois. He was a genius, a teacher and an extensive art collector. In fact, the first piece of fine art I owned was a Robert von Neumann sculpture that Marvin gave to me.

I regard Marvin's talent for gracefully balancing the depth of fine art and the whimsy of toy design — and his willingness to show me how to do the same — as his gift to me. Ever since, I've carried that sense of warmth and play through even my most serious work.

Mentors have altered the course of my life long after I thought myself susceptible to such alteration. I've been lucky enough to have people who took the time to draw out of me some creative potential that I'd not yet seen; it's happened in my teens, in my 20s and even now, in my 60s. I'm proof that it's never too late or too early to help someone chart his or her course — or change it.

I encourage you to find a mentor and to be a mentor. And no matter which side of the commencement stage you're on, whether you're a teacher or a student, make sure to keep in contact with those you've inspired, and those who have inspired you.