Piper winner took curious road to classroom

by Bill Cunningham

Brock Brown added the Minnie Stevens Piper Award to a long list of teaching awards in May 2008. The associate professor of geography is one of 17 Texas State faculty members to receive the award since it was inaugurated in 1958 – a number second only to the University of Texas at Austin.

The Piper Foundation Award goes to a handful of Texas college teachers every year for outstanding teaching and mentoring. Brown’s list also includes the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Alumni Association Teaching Award of Honor and numerous others at Texas State, and he has twice received the Distinguished Teaching Achievement Award from the National Council for Geographic Education. He will be promoted to full professor in September.

Brown points out that he feels fortunate to have been selected as the Piper Professor nominee from Texas State since there are many exceptionally qualified instructors on this campus. He goes on to say that the real reward is the privilege of being a professor and having the opportunity to convey the practical application and benefits of geographical analysis to the complexities of the world his students are inheriting and for which they must soon accept responsibility. His interests lie at the interface between humans and the environment, and making his academic discipline – urban and economic geography – an integral part of his own lifestyle.

Born on the plains of Kansas during a blizzard, he was the only child of young parents who, because of economic hardships at the time, were never able to graduate from high school. His father worked a variety of retail sales jobs, eventually managing Newton’s Sherwin Williams store. His mother was a stay-at-home mom when he was young, then worked as a hair dresser, and for the last 30 years she has been a fabric artist specializing in quilting and wearable art.

A career of academic achievement was hardly projected for Brown by the townspeople of Newton, Kansas. Undiagnosed learning disabilities provided obstacles to his education, which was further plagued, he candidly admits, by a host of behavioral problems. He recalled his struggle to learn to read and spell. “I was a terrible reader,” he says. “In elementary school, I lived in dread of being called on to read out loud.”

He spent recesses day after day practicing spelling words that defied his ability to memorize. “In third grade,” he says, “we all made little construction paper kites with yarn tails and our names on them. The teacher displayed them around the room. When you got a 100 in spelling, you got a ribbon on your kite tail. At the end of the year, mine was the only kite with no ribbons!”

Because learning was so difficult, he began to dislike school, he says, and behaved accordingly. He was unable to meet the "county-county seat" memorization requirement for seventh grade geography and was nearly retained. At this point he developed a distinct dislike for geography that would persist for years. In high school he was funneled into vocational classes and didn't like those any better. He met the minimum academic requirements and was allowed to walk across the stage at his high school graduation even though he owed the school 80 hours of detention time.

“I worked in construction the summer after graduation, and on days too rainy to work I would report to school and serve my...
detention," Brown says with a laugh, his feet propped up on the one clear spot on his desk in the Evans Liberal Arts Building. His office is piled high with books and interesting artifacts.

After high school, college was nowhere in Brown's plans. Finally free of the books and classes that he hated, he headed into what he calls "a smattering of horrible jobs": laying sidewalks in the Kansas sun for 10 hours a day, canning bad eggs for dog food in an egg-processing plant, clearing brush from a flood plain, switching cars in a railroad yard. After a couple of years of manual labor, college didn't look so bad to him. "In those days in Kansas, anyone who graduated from high school was allowed to enter the state university system," he says. "So they had to let me in."

He drifted through several majors at Wichita State University and then happened on a course in education that addressed, among other things, the great debate between B.F. Skinner and Carl Rogers – should students be conditioned to fit society, or should they be encouraged to develop and find their unique path in life. The debate made perfect sense to him. He started making A's and earned a bachelor's degree in education in 1972. He began to teach elementary school in Wichita, and he says it was there, teaching sixth grade, that he finally learned how to add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators. He earned a master's in 1977.

Geography had still not clicked as a passion for him. "Up to that point, I had no understanding or desire for geography," Brown said. He took a break from teaching and went to work as a salesperson for a textbook company. One day while leafing through a physical geography textbook, a revelation came to him: Geography explains "why some things are the way they are." Geographic thinking provided the framework he needed to make sense out the world. He was hooked.

He quit sales and, living in Norman, Okla., earned a second master's degree and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Oklahoma.

Brown was on the faculty at the University of Colorado in 1992 when former Department of Geography Chairman Dick Boehm recruited him to come to San Marcos.

"Dr. Boehm made a powerful argument when he told me that this university appreciates, supports, acknowledges and rewards exemplary teaching," Brown said when he accepted the Piper Award. "What he forgot to tell me was the best part of all, that at Texas State I would become part of one of the most dedicated and successful communities of outstanding educators in the country."

Brown's challenges with his own learning have given him a special appreciation for the fact that people learn in different ways. In college, he was not the typical notetaker and textbook highlighter. Instead, he sometimes rolled out 10-foot sheets of butcher paper and "drew" the concepts he wanted to remember. When asked a question, he would see in his head a section of the butcher paper with the answer and articulate it.

Brown serves as an expert reviewer on the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) social studies content validation committee that reviews all high school social studies tests as part of the approval process before testing. He and several professors are the last people to provide input on the test before it is distributed to the state's public school districts. The content validation committee reviews the test items for content accuracy along with appropriateness for all students in Texas schools. His learning disabilities enhance his contribution to the review of the content of the secondary social studies TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) and end-of-course assessments. "I can look at the questions from the viewpoint of someone with learning disabilities," Brown says. "I see potential problems with questions that are not always evident to others."

As a geographer he sees spatial interconnections in the world around him that many others fail to see. This perspective is part of the appeal of geography for Brown, who teaches more than 400 undergraduate students a year and is advisor to 150. "Thinking geographically has driven me to some quirky ways of creating foundations for courses," he admits. "I can start out with hunter-gatherers and take students all the way to the global economy using a single model, or make the connections between market demand for frog legs in the United States and public health in Bangladesh.

"I want students to see spatial connections and to understand that actions here have consequences there and vice versa," he says about teaching geography. He tries to integrate a wide variety of issues such as the environment, sustainability and
economics. “The world’s resources would not be anywhere near adequate today if the entire world lived and consumed at the rate we do in the United States. My goal is to get students to think about the people we share this planet with and our common future.”

The Piper honoree practices what he preaches. He lives the lifestyle he encourages. He has transformed his yard into an urban “wildscape” project and has created a Thoreau-esque atmosphere in his own neighborhood to conserve water, improve habitat and bio-diversity, and demonstrate the benefits of reversing the impact of urban sprawl.

The result is a peaceful escape from the traditional ideas of landscaping, and like Thoreau, his escape comes complete with his own Walden Pond for contemplating the issues he introduces to his classes.

Brock Brown received many letters of support in his nomination for the Piper Award, but probably none was as impressive as the one from Gilbert Grosvenor, chairman of the board of the National Geographic Society.

Grosvenor wrote that he met Brown in 1993 when Brown was selected to lead a professional geography field experience for Washington, D.C., inner-city teachers. Grosvenor said the experience “revitalized the teaching careers of many dedicated professionals” and that their evaluations “identified Dr. Brown as an exemplary teacher” in both subject knowledge and delivery style.

“We were so impressed with the outcome of this experience that we selected Brock as the director of a new national program to be conducted at the society’s headquarters,” the chairman wrote.

Brown has returned to the society’s headquarters numerous times in the past 16 years, and “his impact has had a geometrical effect on thousands of geography students whose teachers have returned to their home states and incorporated their new content material and teaching strategies into their local curriculum,” Grosvenor noted.

He credited Brown for his contribution in helping to make the undergraduate geography program at Texas State the largest and one of the best programs in America.

“His reputation as a classroom teacher borders on legendary,” Grosvenor wrote.

Not bad for a Kansas boy who almost flunked geography in the seventh grade.