

## The Passing of a Legend: Remembering Howard W. Bremer October 14, 2013

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*Gentleman: a man whose conduct conforms to a high standard of propriety or correct behavior.*
— **Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary**

Unfortunately, I’ve known for a couple of weeks what this month’s column was likely to be about.  After a brief illness, my friend Howard Bremer died last Friday.

Howard was part of what’s rightly called The Greatest Generation—those who survived the Great Depression, fought and won World War II and then came home to build the most prosperous nation in history.  Howard represented a rapidly receding era when integrity, modesty and personal responsibility were commonly held virtues.

As a 21 year old he went into the Navy during World War II. Coming back he attended his dearly beloved University of Wisconsin, becoming a patent attorney. He worked at the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF) from 1960 until the very end of his life. Howard claimed that he retired in 1988, but we all knew that wasn’t true.  Anytime I called his office he was likely to answer.

I well remember first meeting Howard in 1978. I was on Senator Birch Bayh’s Judiciary Committee staff.  Purdue University contacted the Senator about a patent problem they were having and Senator Bayh asked us to meet with them to learn more. Ralph Davis, who ran Purdue’s technology transfer office, brought along Howard and Norman Latker, then patent counsel at the National Institutes of Health.  The trajectory of my life was about to change.

The meeting led to the introduction of what was to become the Bayh-Dole Act.  It also led to my association with two of the most remarkable people I have known who served as my mentors.  Now both are gone and I deeply feel the loss.

Even if you were not fortunate enough to know them, they touched your life as well.  You see Howard and Norm changed the course of history in a very real way.  No longer does the government take federally funded inventions away from universities and small businesses thus dooming promising discoveries to sit unused on agency shelves. Howard and Norm helped us craft the Bayh-Dole Act which introduced the incentives of the patent system– and decentralized technology management– to take these inventions from the laboratory into the marketplace where they now improve lives around the world.

Howard not only testified at our hearing, but he rallied other universities to the cause.  Working through WARF, Howard’s efforts were critical in our eventual success enacting Bayh-Dole despite long odds.  Over the years, he remained a steadfast defender pushing back against the critics of the patent system.

Howard was not someone who went around picking fights.  However, when he saw misleading attacks launched against Bayh-Dole, he would not sit idly by. His replies were always factual.  He never stooped to personal attacks.

Most of our phone calls started with one of us saying: “Hey, did you see this—that is outrageous!” about the latest diatribe from the critics. After we commiserated that once again Bayh-Dole was being smeared, Howard would say: “Well, you know that if we don’t reply no one else will.” That led to a mutual sigh. Then we went to work on a response.

While it’s no exaggeration to say that Howard is internationally recognized as a real expert in the field, he was always a very humble man.  Two years ago I saw him standing alone in a crowded hotel lobby late one afternoon at a major conference. Without realizing it, most of the attendees had a job because of Howard’s work. I asked what he was doing for dinner. He said nothing, so I invited him out as my treat.  Howard was doing well for someone then 89 years old, but as we started walking I realized how far away the restaurants were. I suggested that we stop at the first one still a long city block ahead. It turned out to be an International House of Pancakes.

While it certainly wasn’t the most expensive dinner I ever bought, it was one of the best. Howard entertained me for hours.  As always he was kind to everyone and so charmed our waitress that she offered him a free desert.  She offered me the check. He was that kind of guy.

Howard attended the Association of University Technology Managers meeting this year—an organization he helped found in the 1970’s to foster the profession. Howard knew it was his last as he was not physically able to travel any longer. But there was no sadness; he enjoyed seeing many of his friends for what he knew was the final time. Fittingly, AUTM honored Howard at a plenary session.  Later Gene Quinn and I took Howard and his delightful wife Caryl out to dinner and spent the night laughing and telling stories.  It was the highlight of the trip for me.

I first knew something was wrong with Howard after sending him the recent attack on Bayh-Dole from the New England Journal of Medicine.  Normally that would have been more than enough to generate a call.  I found out that he had been in the hospital.  Learning of the seriousness of his condition, I called him one last time.  While it was hard for him to speak, his mind and spirit were intact.

One of the last things Howard said to me was: “Where is everyone else when Bayh-Dole’s attacked?  Why are we always the ones having to respond?”

He also told me how proud he was that the AUTM Board had invested more funds into the Howard W. Bremer scholarship that’s awarded to promising newcomers to the profession.

While I was saddened when I got the notice that he was gone, there was no kindness in having my friend lingering any longer. His body was simply worn out after a long, full life dedicated to helping others.  I truly don’t believe that anything bad has happened to Howard. But there’s a hole in my life now that can’t be filled.

Saint Paul said:  “I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.” That certainly applies to the life of Howard W. Bremer.  I am grateful for the privilege of having known him.   God bless you, good friend.