

## *Wesley C. Becker, Esquire\**

### \* Refers to:

- 1) a country gentleman
- 2) a woman's escort
- 3) a candidate for knighthood in medieval times who served a knight
- 4) a shield carrier (old French usage)

Wes Becker was indeed a country gentleman with a strong love of all things equestrian. Much of Wes' time in Oregon over the past thirty years was spent in the country where he indulged his passions for sailing, gardening and horseback riding. He was a romantic woman's escort who was father to seven wonderful children; they enriched his life immeasurably. Wes dedicated over half his life to the service of education and the scientific study of human behavior. He carried the shield against ignorance as one of the most important founders and early champions of the field of applied behavior analysis.

The ensuing material tries to characterize some of the contributions Wes Becker made to the field of Applied Behavior Analysis and more broadly to the processes of teaching and learning. It is a privilege to provide commentary on his qualities and seminal achievements in our field. However, it is difficult to capture the essence of Wes with mere words and I worry that the following material will fall short in doing justice to his myriad, diverse contri-

butions and enormous career impact. He was truly a giant in our field and distinguished contributor to its history of accomplishments.

The reception that Wes' work received from the educational establishment does not begin to do justice to the elegance and vision of his contributions. Wes retired from education still striving to persuade the profession to embrace evidence-based solutions and to adopt proven approaches for achieving true prevention goals and outcomes. Ironically, it was after his retirement that the iceberg of resistance to research-based improvement has begun to thaw. This warming in recent years can be attributed in part to belated recognition of the effectiveness and power of the kind of approaches that Wes pioneered, approaches that contribute to solving some of the most vexing challenges confronting our society's children, youth and families who are at risk.

Consumers of the teaching-learning process are now increasingly aware that they need not settle for mediocre educational outcomes with regard to any individual or any segment of our society. The collective impact of Wes' works has proved to be instrumental in the development of this broad-based awareness. At his core, Wes believed it was possible to construct instructional arrangements that would then teach anything to anyone. In his design and advocacy of instructional innovations, he most resembled an engineer. He assumed that problems were solvable, and focused his energy on constructing solutions. He set his technical skills to the task of the betterment educational outcomes of all, but he especially targeted his efforts to the service of those most disadvantaged by our society.

In spite of his remarkable skills, achievements, and impact as a researcher and developer, I think Wes would describe himself first and foremost as a teacher. He had an unwavering belief that education is the key to a satisfying quality of life, and he knew how to assist others in finding and staying on the path to educational achievement that opens so many doors and frees up human potential.

I first met Wes when he and Zig Engelmann were recruited to the University of Oregon in 1970. Wes and Zig were seeking a more receptive and supportive environment in which to develop Direct Instruction and they found a strong supporter and effective advocate in Robert Mattson, the principal developer of Special Education at the University of Oregon. Their work flourished through the Follow Through Project, the founding and development of the Engelmann-Becker Corporation, and their participation in the department of Special Education's instructional programs. The next 15 years were an exciting period of tremendous creative effort, innovation and impact which built a foundation for much of what we regard today as sound policy and effective educational practices. Substantial amounts of the work taking place today in Direct Instruction and applied behavior analysis can be traced, to this period of remarkable achievement by Wes, Zig, Doug Carnine, and their many associates. We all owe them a debt of gratitude for their contributions that prepared the ground for our later accomplishments.

Wes was superbly trained as a psychologist and completed his university-based education at Stanford in a period of just six years from start to finish. He specialized in learning theory, statistics and measurement in his graduate work. I have never known anyone more accomplished in these areas and very few who are his equal. Wes was not only a remarkably gifted and highly skilled professional but he passed the test that so many academics fail—he knew how to apply and deliver his expertise for maximum positive effect. After leaving Stanford, Wes

became an outstanding psychologist at Illinois and was nationally known for his contributions to clinical psychology. However, as the field of applied behavior analysis began to develop in the '60s, he recognized its enormous potential and quickly embraced it. At about the same time, he also entered into a partnership with Zig Engelmann that today ranks as one of the most important collaborations in our collective history.

I became aware of Wes through publication, in the first issue of JABA, of his now classic article with Charles Madsen and Don Thomas (1968, reprinted in this issue). This was a landmark study that provided an elegant component analysis of a behavioral intervention for managing classrooms and for understanding the covariation(s) between teacher and child behavior. I learned a great deal from this study and my career path was strongly impacted by its demonstration of experimental control, by establishment of unambiguous causal relations between teacher and child behavior, and by sensitive assessment, via observational coding procedures, of both independent and dependent variables. I was stunned that such powerful experimental control of variables could be achieved and maintained within the relative chaos of a regular classroom environment. This study did much to establish the standard of quality research that came to be expected of applied behavioral researchers. The citation index on this article must now be a mile long.

Wes' passion as a teacher found expression through his own instructional efforts and his mentoring of doctoral students. Many working in the field today owe him a considerable debt for his contributions to their career development in terms of the mentoring, preparation, and perspectives he provided them. However, his most enduring impact in this regard is likely realized through his series of books, developed over a twenty-year period, on applied psychology for teachers which explicated a behavioral-cognitive approach. The first edition of this series was published by Science

Research Associates in 1971 entitled: *Teaching: A Course in Applied Psychology*. An edited book that provided a companion series of readings was also published by SRA at the same time (*An Empirical Basis for Change*). This course was updated and republished in another edition in 1986. Perhaps Wes' most seminal contribution in this area was the three volume edition of this series that he developed in the late '80s. This series included volumes devoted to (1) behavior management, (2) instruction and (3) evaluation. In my view, this ranks as one of the finest resources ever developed for the understanding, change and evaluation of human behavior in applied contexts.

Wes' talents as a technical writer and masterful editor of others' work are legendary among those who worked with him. Wes produced writing in which first drafts were very close to final drafts and he produced this copy at a remarkably rapid rate. His writing has a clarity, parsimony and directness that is the envy of his colleagues.

Wes played such an important role in so many people's lives. As noted, many, including myself, owe much of their professional achievement to

his mentorship and training. He was a fearless advocate for those in whom he believed and he unselfishly downplayed his contributions to works that he produced with others.

He was an unusually kind, gregarious and generous person and is remembered by so many for these qualities. Wes' playful nature found expression through his appreciation for children and animals. His small dog "Puka" was his beloved companion for many years. Wes was a "kid" person in the true sense of the word. He delighted in the joyous squeals of small children at play. He had an amazing way of connecting with them on their level and always managed to delight them through play and his good natured "joshing."

If we had preserved the ancient practice of conferring knighthood, Wes Becker would surely have been a strong candidate for such an entitlement. He was a tireless, fearless, loyal shield bearer for children everywhere and a man for all seasons.