
Pro Rege

Volume 48 | Number 4

Article 4

June 2020

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2020) "For Dr. Marlin Vanden Bosch: Professor, Poet, and Pitcher," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 48: No. 4, 33 - 34.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol48/iss4/4

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For Dr. Marlin Vanden Bosch: Professor, Poet, and Pitcher



by Jim Schaap

Fifty years ago I wrote an essay for him, for the class he was teaching and I was taking—a class in how to teach English. He chewed me out for what I wrote, told me in no uncertain terms that he expected much more of me than I'd shown. In four years of college, I'd never been chewed out like that, for sheer laziness. I could have been, I'm sure, but I wasn't. Somewhere in my files that essay still exists. It was hot. Probably still is. He was angry.

Prof. Vanden Bosch was a great guy, a terrific teacher, a man who was, I knew, successful at his calling, not only because his strengths in the classroom were evident, but also because I knew he carried this nearly sublime reputation among friends who'd had him as a teacher and coach in high school, before he'd moved on to teach in college. They lived in awe of him.

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Raising his ire the way I did with that essay was less distressing than perplexing, so I went to him. The whole thing was a misunderstanding. I had thought the essay was role-playing: "write an essay as if you're a high school kid." That's what I'd done. I was dead wrong.

When I came up to his desk, he was gruff; but when I told him what had happened, he smiled, then laughed. Before the essay assignment, I'm sure I liked him. But the striking turn in his demeanor showed me an impressive strength of character I thought really wonderful.

Prof. Vanden Bosch was beloved. When some years later I returned to my alma mater to teach, we became friends, good friends. Broad-shouldered, muscular, powerful in a way that made most males cower, within him there lived a poet, a man who quoted poems he loved, reams of them, an artist who stopped seeing and writing only when he could no longer find the words.

Mike Vanden Bosch was a regionalist in the best sense of the word, a man of the dark Siouland soil he loved, a native, who gifted us with histories of the town where he lived and the college where for years he held forth the resonant beauty of the written word. He had the shoulders of a mason. In his sixties, he was asked to coach women's softball. He did, and did well with the quiet strength that marked most everything he did.

He had to be close to retirement when he called me one June night and asked if I'd play first base for an ad hoc softball game he'd lined up in McNally, Iowa, on an old sand lot under lights. He didn't need to say he'd be chucking—that came with the territory. Real northwest Iowans knew him better

as a pitcher than a poet. On the mound, he was legendary.

Eleven years ago the two of us were asked to speak at the funeral of Harold Aardema, a country editor from Doon, Iowa, a mutual friend. I was proud to have been invited to say something. Mike was too, I'm sure. The funeral was out of town, so we drove together to an old church our mutual friend had begun attending when he and his ideas no longer found welcome in the one where he'd spent much of his life.

That funeral was the first time I suspected his words weren't quite in a line. Something was unglued in what he said that morning, and that scared me—not *what* he said, but *how*. The ideas jarred, didn't run like they should have, almost left the tracks. The man I listened to in that little church that morning wasn't the Mike I knew. Something had gone slightly adrift.

We talked, up and back. I told him I wanted to see the farm place where he grew up, just one son of an over-sized Iowa farm family I knew from his myriad tales, a family mostly poor but proud and pious. We took gravel roads to find it, and I heard at least a dozen more earthy stories, some of which I remember—the time he and his buddies skipped church and went to a county fair where one of his friends put him up to take on some side-show wrestler who'd give any takers ten bucks if they'd best him. Mike was just a kid, but he walked out of the ring ten bucks richer.

One of the stories had to do with his mother, whose senility, in her late years, was profound, he said, so profound she couldn't recognize her children. Nothing seemed to register, he said, but somewhere in that locked-up mind the old hymns still played. If they would sit in her room and start into "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," he said his mother's lips would move because the words were still there when nothing else was. He loved that.

Three years ago, on a Sunday, I sat in front of him at a comprehensive care facility in a worship

service he slept through, crumpled up in a wheelchair. He had become his mother. After the service I tried to greet him. He didn't look up. I just hoped he'd heard the music.

The man we'd eulogized was a story-teller. One night the country editor got to talking about Mike Vanden Bosch and said he'd never forget the day Mike came back from college with a knock-out girl, a dish from back east, blonde and beautiful. "All of us were green jealous because," the old editor said, "there she sat, right beside him in that car, you know—before seat belts—right there next to him, that little pony tail tossing back and forth as they drove down the street."

That story I remember, too.

She was there at the home too, sitting with him at the worship service. There's no pony tail, but she's still beautiful. I'm thankful for her—and a million other beloved caregivers who give their lives to men and women they won't and can't stop loving, even when so much of what those loved ones were has already departed.

In a way, Mike Vanden Bosch, poet and pitcher, teacher on court and classroom, husband and father, and grandpa had been gone already for a long time; but just this week he died. So, [because of Covid-19] his life will be celebrated only by a grieving family, who are likely thankful for him that the end had finally come. For many, it seems, dying is hard, hard work.

The girl in the pony trail and her children and theirs will be alone in this pestilence all around. There will be no eulogies, no public visitation with family, no real funeral.

He deserves much more, as does his wife. His loving family deserves every square inch of blessed grace the Lord can bestow upon them as they remember a man they loved and still do.

May the words of those old hymns his mother could still sing move their lips too. This morning I'm thankful for him, his life, and so much good he's left behind.