

Thoughts on my friend, Gavin Brown:

Thank you Chancellor and Vice Chancellor for providing the opportunity for us to honour Gavin in this way today.

This morning, we have heard others speak of Gavin's soaring intellect, his academic genius and collegiality, and his many contributions to this University and to the higher education sector more generally.

But I have been asked to speak about Gavin Brown as a friend. To talk about him in the diverse guises in which I have known him – an employer and mentor, an AFL fanatic, a witty, often hilarious, and always great, companion – a friend.

I can well recall my experience with Gavin Brown on the very first occasion on which I encountered him.

It was in the late '90s at the Australian Graduate School of Management, or AGSM, at the UNSW over early meetings relating to the merger of the AGSM with the Graduate School of Business here at the University of Sydney.

I was but a fly on the wall at these discussions, but I was fascinated by Gavin's extraordinary ability to debate and negotiate. These included discussions with Fred Hilmer, another admirable Vice-Chancellor now, but then the Dean of the AGSM. It was great spectator sport watching Gavin give Fred a very good run for his money, - and let me assure you, there were few people who ever could.

Some time later, I was appointed to the a role of Director of Development and External Affairs or rather, Director of External Affairs and Development as Gavin preferred, because the acronym was 'DEAD'. And thus Gavin became my manager, a mentor, and later, a friend.

Gavin was a generous but quite challenging mentor.

Between my appointment and actually assuming my duties, Gavin asked me to speak at a Dean's forum he had organised.

I politely refused. I have no aptitude for speaking outside my rather small area of authority. I reminded him that I knew nothing about Development at Sydney and besides, I didn't even work for him yet!

Out came the charm, and Gavin could be very charming indeed.

And guess what? Of course I spoke and Gavin got a free kick.

To be honest, I can't recall what I said on that occasion, and I sincerely hope that the participants of the forum can't recall what I said either!

Not long after this, however, he did the same thing to me again!

This time I was to speak at a Vice Chancellor's strategy retreat at Terrigal. I had just begun at Sydney University, and hadn't had time to develop a sound strategy, so I was not confident. However –of course, I had no choice, this time, and so I spoke in a slot in the programme, just before lunch.

As I lurched to the end of my talk, breathing a big sigh of relief that it was over and there was no time for questions - and I could see lunch coming. Gavin suddenly announced that he was making a slight change to the programme and that I would take questions after the lunch break!

I was not ready for that and frankly displeased at being put on the spot, if not scared stiff!

So during the break I argued with him that it would be preferable that he give comments on the paper and field questions, or at least share the questions with me.

The ensuing conversation was one of those sessions, the likes of which many of you will recall well, where Gavin would sit leaning his head back, glasses propped up on his forehead and promptly go to sleep!

This was more than a little alarming to a newcomer.

However, this turned out to be quite customary for Gavin.

But what was never clear was whether he was really asleep - or awake. After all, he only had to shut one eye! But typically, he'd suddenly interject, and having taken in and processed all that had been said, and with clarity and persuasion, he'd offer a view, or explain that you'd need to work on the notion more, or that he wasn't buying it and why!

On this occasion, (and as I said, being new to his techniques), I was thrilled when after hearing me out, he acknowledged 'Yes we could do that, as I had suggested, – we could continue the session with him taking questions.

But then he quietly added, "But we won't! You learn faster at the deep end."

At the time I thought that both these incidents doubtlessly served his interests much more than mine, but looking back, in the longer run, they definitely did serve mine well too. And he was always quick to remind me so.

Further, as a mentor, he would succinctly but pointedly let me know where he felt I could shape up, albeit that of course I saw myself as a gentle and very perceptive soul. As feedback, he'd simply and privately address me as Adolf, Germaine or other, his point being perfectly transparent, - or as he famously said on one occasion to my dismay: "You're really good at road-kill. Why don't you reserve it and practice upstairs?!"

To me Gavin was the quintessential Renaissance man.

He had more than a passing knowledge of music, languages-- Latin, French, some German a smattering of Mandarin, and he loved words.

He was exact to the nth degree in the use of words, and would puzzle on unfamiliar words and deduce their meaning from his knowledge of Latin and other languages, before ever resorting to a dictionary.

It became a challenge for me to find words he didn't know and to use them appropriately. I recall, I only ever managed to find one, the word 'avulse', a word I now love because it represents to me a monumental personal achievement. To use the word appropriately, I had to creatively weave river courses into conversation, but it didn't take Gavin long before he had added 'avulse' to his lexicon. Geographers amongst you will know this word, but for others, who might be puzzled, it means the action of pulling or tearing away. So of course with 'avulse' under his belt Gavin would be at pains to use it himself. Not just rivers, but as it turned out even whole music departments might 'avulse'

Gavin disliked the misuse of words. Indeed I can feel him over my shoulder now. He did concede to allow us to make 'spurtle' into a verb, for private use only. For those of you who may not know, a spurtle is a Scottish implement for stirring porridge. My husband Ralph and I gave Gavin a fine spurtle a few years ago. It is made of finely turned Australian timber and I had to confess to Gavin that I really didn't wholly enjoy giving it away! Even to him! So this spurtle had a string to it. It was for temporary use only, to be exchanged periodically when we met. So it was that the spurtle was exchanged in Sydney, Melbourne, Portsea and Adelaide, and it was eventually conceded that 'to meet to pass on the spurtle' was allowed to become a verb, 'to spurtle'. And we sincerely hope that Diane will continue to spurtle with us

Gavin had an abiding interest in, and wise judgement on, issues of governance, – and of their application, of course, to the challenging and robust politics at times with the Senate.

The tragic passing of Barbara, his first wife, left him personally adrift. He had always thought, – with very good reason, as many of you would realise, that he would predecease Barbara and this is how he spoke and organised his personal affairs.

While the passing of Barbara was still raw, I witnessed the man's strength, devotion and focus on the needs of the University in the face of some extraordinary opportunism by some of the political players during that time when he was seen as vulnerable.

Gavin loved all sport, but perhaps particularly Australian Rules Football, rugby union – especially the University's rugby team and club, rowing and horse racing, –and he loved a wager ,on anything really.

The Renaissance man was widely read, with a deep interest in contemporary problems.

Amongst the more important contemporary problems he counted the fortunes of his beloved Swans.

He was passionate about the Swans and followed them closely. He enjoyed the Swans' Centre Circle Club, but if truth be known, he preferred to watch the matches down in the fray of the outer where he could let his hair down with friends like Greg Harris, and others. He was so passionate about his team, in 2005 when the Swans won the Premiership, I seriously feared the excitement might be too much for his 'dicky ticker'.

When Diane entered the scene, friends had deep concerns as to whether he would be able to maintain his avid support of the Swans. At the time, Diane readily admitted she did not appreciate the finer points of the game.

I recall us attending a match out at the Olympic Stadium together. At one point, the audience leapt to its feet roaring at one of those Barry Hall moments. Diane, who was getting into the spirit of things, as she so reliably does, stood up and shouted at the top of her voice, "Good catch!"

The surrounding audience withdrew their eyes from our hero Barry, turned, and planted them on the "Eliza Doolittle" in our midst. My husband took Gavin aside on the quiet and advised him that he would have to educate her! Many thought she wouldn't make it but she did – and quickly!

It is important to note that Gavin was thoughtful and treated all with respect and sincerity – fellow faculty, assistants, yeomen bedell, all. I recall him sending a meal from the stadium hospitality suite down to a waiting driver. As Greg Harris reminded me recently, Gavin seemed to never forget his modest roots, and was never arrogant.

As I said, Gavin loved a wager. He challenged me to \$5 on the results of a Swans game. We had to pick the winner and by how much. On the first occasion, I won and was thrilled. He challenged me the next week. I initially refused because he hadn't paid up the first \$5. Silly me, for thinking the canny Scot would - but I say that as a Scot myself. So then it was \$5 if I won and \$5 if I lost. He'd do anything to have the wager on!

I won again, perhaps to your surprise. I was loudly claiming a trend line between these two proud data points, but Gavin, of course, wouldn't concede to this being indicative of my better judgment. He claimed it was just 'extraordinary beginner's luck.' And so I would get a lesson on noisy data and outliers and so on, but never a concession that my judgement, or even my luck, was better than his!

So we talked of footballers and their injuries, business, governance, leadership, strategy, people, horses and their trainers, then Theta, kernel numbers and spline

smoothing, game and chaos theories and risk, life and fate. I am grateful to Gavin, that I feel extremely more than well-equipped for the rest of my life's likely needs for kernel numbers and spline smoothing.

Gavin had great powers of grasping, marshalling and analysing facts, however complex, which enabled him to give lucid and interesting summaries and comments, and to make fun of them. He had a great ability to engage generally, but in small groups we really saw the essence of his personality. He could of course be serious without becoming too solemn, but more often he overlaid his cleverness and serious points with being witty, very often hilarious. His company was something we all looked forward to and absolutely relished.

Gavin's relationship with Diane refreshed and invigorated him. It was around this time that his closed eye opened. I asked him what he had done to it and he claimed, I think quite genuinely, that he'd had nothing done to it, indeed he hadn't noticed its opening. He also abandoned his glasses at that time. I am convinced that the fun and solace he found in Diane was part of that secret.

He was a devoted father and took great pride in his family. Colin's creativity and recent successes in his music interests and Janet's burgeoning career and announcement of her forthcoming marriage to Ran, gave him immense joy. We especially thank you Diane, for the wonderful, - all too few, - happy years you gave Gavin, enriching all our lives.

For all of us here, especially his family and those who had the good fortune to work closely with him, his passing is an irreplaceable loss. The loss of a loved one, a great leader, a colleague, a mentor and a great friend.

To Diane, his children, Janet and Colin, and step sons Benjamin and Oliver, we share your loss and sadness.

To me Gavin was a soul-mate. Soul-mates are people who bring out the best in you. They're not always perfect, but they're always perfect for you.

I like you, rejoice in Gavin's magnificent achievements, his brilliance, his wit and his warmth, and fun friendship. How fortunate we are to have known this giant intellect and fun, warm, man.

As John Bunyan said of Mr Valiant-for truth:

"So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

May the trumpets for Gavin sound loudly and include a swansong of the Swan's song, "Cheer, Cheer, the Red and the White"!