

Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. (2019). George Betts: Scholar, leader, and advocate for the social and emotional development of gifted and talented students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 63(4) 203–204.

George Betts: Scholar, Leader, and Advocate for the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted and Talented Students

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Our dear friend and colleague, George Betts, Professor Emeritus at the University of Northern Colorado, passed away on August 3, 2019. Kind, gracious, and thoughtful, George was a passionate leader in our field, identified by NAGC (National Association for Gifted Children) in 2003 as one of the *50 Most Influential Leaders in Gifted Education*. In addition to his numerous scholarly contributions and national and international presentations, George was an action-oriented person who believed that practical applications of academic scholarship are the best way to make real and lasting change in education.

His numerous accomplishments span a period of 40 years and include founder and former director of the Center for the Education and Study of the Gifted, Talented, and Creative at the University of Northern Colorado; cofounder of The Colorado Academy of Educators of the Gifted, Talented and Creative; former director of the Summer Enrichment Program; and the creator and founder of Advanced Learning Placement for Students (ALPS), a gifted and talented magnet program that serves high-ability students in Grades 1 to 9.

George believed that service to one's profession is a necessary component for making gifted education a viable force in the education of high-potential young people. In this regard, he assumed several important leadership roles both in Colorado and at the national level. These roles included president of the Colorado Association for Gifted Children, 21 years on the Board of Directors of the NAGC, and, most recently, NAGC President.

George is best known for the creation of the Autonomous Learner Model, developed in collaboration with his colleague Jolene Kercher. This model is unique in that it was the first organized attempt in gifted education programming models to focus on what is now popularly referred to as social and emotional development. George often said that autonomous learners are never satisfied and constantly seek creative opportunities to solve problems and create solutions. In a recent conversation with us, he reiterated his belief that our world needs creative problem solvers now more than ever. George's concept of educating "the whole child" focused on six essential social and emotional qualities that educators could instill in their students: Unconditional Positive Regard; Development of Self; Emotional, Social, Cognitive, and Physical Development; Passion for Learning; Working Together; and Seeking to Better the World. He developed a Whole Child Task Force and was decades ahead of others in helping us understand the multidimensional nature of gifted individuals and how that affects their development.

Professionally, George reached several pinnacles in his life. In 1990, he received the NAGC Distinguished Service Award, and in 1996, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented. In 2006, he received the prestigious M. Lucile Harrison Award for Professional Excellence at the University of Northern Colorado. George considered this to be a capstone award of his career, as it was given to him by his professional peers at the University of Northern Colorado.

George was incredibly devoted to his family and mentioned his wonderful wife Donni and their two children in every conversation. His family was the core of his life, and he and Donni had an incredible partnership. They moved to Europe when they were newly married; hiking, traveling, and having adventures all over the world. He adored his son Jordi and daughter-in-law Kristen, his daughter Kristi and son-in-law Jac, and granddaughters Ainsley, Lauren, and Hayley. As he courageously fought the disease that took his life, he mentioned that the support of his family had kept him alive and happy, even in his final days. He was so touched and blessed to have so many friends and former students who touched his life and kept in close contact with him.

George was the quintessential “nice guy” in our field. He was a proverbial big brother to his students, devoted friend to those seeking his counsel and advice, and compromiser and peace maker in the policymaking boards and governing bodies on which he served. His unconditional acceptance and positive regard for others cast a radiance that touched every human being that he encountered. He was especially instrumental in emphasizing the affective as well as the cognitive needs of gifted learners from pre-K through adulthood, and he modeled this belief in the many interactions he had throughout his career with people with whom he worked. In spite of his many honors and accomplishments, he was a modest and unpretentious person who always put the needs of others ahead of his own.

Hundreds of accolades flooded in about George to his family over the last few days, including, “There is a bit of George’s influence in every child I have taught.”

One former attendee and then counselor in the SEP Program that George directed at University of Northern Colorado for over three decades explained that in manner and looks,

George is kinda like a cross between Mr. Rogers and Santa Claus, and he’s gleefully telling us about the “SEP Glow” and how SEP is like a smorgasbord and some people will just nibble and others will devour but we’ll all come away with a feeling of knowing we’re wonderful for being exactly the way we are and we’ll make lifelong friends. All in just two weeks. So yeah, it was corny. Except for the fact that every last word of it was true.

Another former student called George, “The best of the best, the kindest of the kind and the warmest of the warm.”

In conclusion, George often used this poem that he wrote to describe autonomous life-long learners:

A life-long learner is one
who loves the moment,
seeks truth, friendship, knowledge and wisdom.
This person accepts self and others,
and realizes the chance to make this a better world.
A lifelong learner discovers new paths for growth, joy,
knowledge and friendship. The journey begins today . . .

George's life journey exemplified his goals for the gifted and talented students he served across his happy and well-lived life. We are grateful to him for his passion and compassion, his service, and his belief in the intrinsic good in every person he met and in the field to which he contributed so much. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Life must be lived and curiosity kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life."

George was passionate about embracing life until the day he died—and may we all learn from his example.

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