



David Oliver Brown
ROBS History Project
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David O. Brown and I had both been serving the Brentwood Public School District since we arrived. We had never during any of those years though, ever sat down and spoken directly of what on this day we'd discover we had in common. Our respective disciplines may have accounted for one explanation of our present blindness since I'd been hired to teach Social Studies at the High School while David had taught and Coached music and Fencing at the Junior High. Seldom had our paths ever crossed during the intervening years in our richly integrated suburban educational setting.

He was born in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. David Oliver Brown moved next with his family to East Flatbush/Brownsville when he was four years old and given the nickname *Tarzan* by a barber who lived on his block. He acquired his name for the reason that his aura represented the opposite of his appearance since he was thought to have been the skinniest kid in all of Brooklyn and it was said if he stood sideways might not even been seen at all. His mother's sister named him Oliver. She loved that name and even gave the name Olive to her daughter because she loved it that much. He was happy he took the name even though he took a lot of good natured ribbing from other kids on the block for it. He was called Oliver Twist and Oliver Wendell Holmes. His first year at Tilden High School when the teacher began taking attendance on the first day and called the role he began reading "David Brown" and a boy in the back of the room replied *here* and Dave answered "*Here*", as well. The teacher tried again and they both answered for a second time. "Oh, we can't have that", the teacher said, as he discovered both boys with the same first and last names. He designated the boy in the first row from that day forward to be known as David O. Brown thus, solving the problem by restoring his own unique identity from thence forward.

He'd been born in 1930 just as the Great Depression began to take hold of the nation. Both his mother and father were born in this country. David had one brother but no sisters. His mother's maiden name was Rosenberg. She had only one sister and his father who had a larger family with three brothers and four sisters. Being born in Brooklyn David had spent his whole life on Long Island surrounded by water. He took advantage of that by swimming at Coney Island and Brighton Beach, even taking the subway to wherever he wanted to go in the City for a nickel with a commanding sense of personal safety at all times.

His brother Arnold was very musical and began studying violin as a child of seven or eight. He auditioned in NYC for the High School of Music and Art where he attended four years. When his brother later on had a chance to try out for the High School of Music and Art in New York City, he went also for four years. David didn't do much with music when he was in Elementary School he occasionally played the piano and took lessons from about nine to thirteen until he discovered basket ball then followed his bliss and the game much to his own considerable regret years later when he wished he had pursued piano lessons more vigorously. His mother had a beautiful voice. Her sister, the one who gave him his middle name, was a concert pianist. Music and the Arts ran throughout the family. His parents used to take him to Prospect Park for the Goldman Band Concerts, to the Brooklyn Museum for the WPA Orchestra, (*Works Progress Administration*). They were very fine. They provided financial assistance to all those starving musicians and their performances provided much needed music appreciation for a generation of young listeners who benefited from their life experience by just listening and paying attention. As a child David remembers going to the big water fountain in the center of the sculpture court where he'd load up and then go around shooting the statues with his water pistol, but he was still listening to the music while he was there – he couldn't help but hear it.

David had an Uncle George, who was a fine artist. He was a very talented painter of portraits and received funded employment from the government during the Depression for painting portraits of government dignitaries. He also loved music and played classical guitar. He used to play Bach on his guitar. His work has to be archived somewhere in the files of U.S. Government funding legislation of the 1930's. David still had his wooden, hollow body, six-string acoustic guitar at home. There were many writers, artists and musicians on the

verge of starvation during those years and the government stepped in to save lives by creating projects to give them work that paid them to perform.

David's mother's brother Howard belonged to several groups for acting. David's brother Arnold tried that as well. It took years for David to rid himself of his Brooklyn accent which his wife still ribs him about today.

After they had both graduated from college David went into business with his brother Arnold opening a Baldwin Piano and Organ Dealership Showroom in Beaumont, Texas. There they worked together for nine months, after which David sold his share to Arnold and another partner and with the money he'd saved from what he'd been paid for what he was owed, returned to New York. The business wasn't sufficiently established to be successful for three owners but it was a fine business for two. While there David sang for anyone for whom he was asked to perform as long as they provided publicity for the Baldwin Piano Showroom in Beaumont Texas. He intuitively knew this was not the career he expected to have.

When he left Texas and came back to New York, he first accepted a position for three months selling pianos for another company. He hated it. He then took a job selling records for Sam Goody when he had the first store on forty-ninth Street. He got to know Sam Goody very well. Sam's son and son-in-law both helped him with the business. The store was in mid-town near where the old Madison Square Garden was located. Then a fellow came to work in the store who was just learning the business and he was from Gothenburg Sweden. Then a girl came into the store and they became friendly. She worked for the United States Information Service in Helsinki and they became close.

They promised to write to each other and that sort of thing. He'd saved some money and his brother and his new partner sent him money that they owed him when he was there. So he said, *"as long as I've got the money and I'm single, I'm taking a trip to Scandinavia; Finland. I had to visit Denmark, Copenhagen, but in order to visit those places I had to land first on the furthest place and work my way back east. First, he had to land in Bergen, Norway and Oslo for a few days. So he went on and met his friend in Gothenburg and even met the girl in Sweden but before he saw her when he reached Oslo, he told SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) to find a place for him to stay because he didn't know how long he was going to stay in each place, he was a free spirit who was about to make his own schedule and they said, You must be joking! We have no place to put anybody. We don't do*

that, and he said, "I'm sure you'll find something". It turned out that the students of the University of Oslo, run their dormitories in the summertime for the overflow on the outside, but you must take a little subway to get there, Well, my wife before she was my wife, worked in the little souvenir shop. So from the time we first met when he went into the souvenir shop and he told her she spoke English beautifully, he didn't know she was a language major and she spoke English, French, German and Old Norwegian which is like another language all at the same time. As an aside he told me, "we have kids that can't even learn one language properly". She was a language major. By the time we met and by the time we got engaged, it was five weeks and two of the weeks he wasn't even there. He was off going to Sweden, Helsinki, and Copenhagen. It was 1958. He and his wife met and married in Norway.

Today he has two children; Randy and Erick, both with Scandinavian names – He loves those names. His daughter is very artistic and she has a Masters Degree in Art History, and she is the Slide Curator at Ithaca College. Her husband is teaching at Ithaca College and at a local Junior College in Photography. They met in Photography up at Potsdam. His wife is an Adjunct Professor of Languages; for German and the Scandinavian Languages at C.W. Post College and has done that for quite a number of years. David is very proud of his children. Both are graduates of the Brentwood Schools. "They lived in Brentwood but in addition to living there he taught in Brentwood for thirty years. They're still living in the same house they moved into in 1962. The Long Island expressway had just extended out to Wicks Road where it ended. We lived right off Wicks Road. There was the old Robin Hill Development and we bought our place in the new Robin Hill Development which at that point was filling up very fast".

His daughter Randy has given him two grandchildren who David called his "run of the mill geniuses". He called them straight 'A' students. His granddaughter's name is 'Mathea.' His daughter told him (upon revealing what she was naming her daughter), "You've never heard of that name." He replied "Randy, you underestimate me. Not only will I tell you I've heard of the name but I will tell you what it means. Mathea is the female equivalent of Matthew and he told her, It exists not only in Norwegian but in Italian as well; ie. Cathy Mathea, the singer. She said, "How did you know that? David said, "Experience."

While his son Erick was still a student in Brentwood High School he worked at WXBA at the radio station. When his daughter lived out in California his son-in-law was going for his Masters Degree in photography at a prestigious school in Oakland. He told us his granddaughter is very, very creative. She writes stories and they're quite good. So she's the writer in the family. David told us he couldn't write anything when he was the age she is now. Her education has contributed to really fostering writing skills. She also writes poetry and has been relatively prolific.

His earliest memory is riding a bicycle when he was four years old. Growing up in a mixed ethnic neighborhood of East Flatbush, Brooklyn, not too far from Kings County Hospital, it was during the depression and most women didn't work. It was almost unknown for women to work outside the home. Not until the Second World War did that happen. Even though they couldn't speak all the languages of the other people, everyone got along beautifully. He even picked up some of the various words from those people he met during his growing up years.

He remembers his father frequently being asked for his autograph because he had a strong resemblance to Clark Gable, but he was much smaller – about five foot eight. But he had a moustache and he looked just like Clark Gable when he was younger. That was when he was often asked for his autograph. He worked for a Prudential Insurance Agent for East New York in Brownsville.

When asked he asserted that his mother had never tried to influence or tell either his brother or himself what they should choose to do in life. She tried to foster them to take piano lessons and encouraged David to belong to a special chorus group in High School, *'The Caroleers'*. He said we performed arrangements and sang for different groups. *"One of the things I remember quite clearly is that I had six teachers in Spanish", each one of them for a half year, but one of them was quite well known. It was Sam Levenson the comedian, who was a humorist, writer, television host, journalist and teacher"*. He was so very funny. He laughed at his own jokes but he was so good he made you laugh too. That was when David was in high school.

He remembered his first paying job when he was a student at the University. His parents helped by sending him ninety dollar a month. He needed another thirty dollars and he earned that by singing for the local temple in

Champaign Urbana, in Central Illinois where the University is located. He made seven and a half dollars every time he sang, four times while he was there. He lived on one hundred and twenty dollars for everything, room, board, lessons, everything. I remember we complained when I reached my fourth year there I was a graduate student in that year and we all complained bitterly, because the tuition had gone up from \$150 to \$180 per semester. That was terrible!

David is a night person; and he seldom retires before midnight. His wife is a morning person and usually goes to sleep about nine o'clock. They currently enjoyed different sleep cycles. He loves spring and the fall. He loved sports, and was a Brooklyn Dodger fan, yet loved basketball and discovered he was quite an athlete. When his father bought him a basketball he could be found at any time practicing shooting hoops. As a student he wasn't exactly crazy about either math or science but music became important to him when he reached the age of fifteen. That was when he came down with Scarlet fever which left him with a permanent heart murmur of which he has had to be conscious ever since and today he's now seventy-three. From the ages of fifteen to eighteen he did no sports at all; no basketball none of the high energy threats to his well being that he learned to harness. He came to learn combining his love of music and sports later on when he took a physical education class in fencing in college. He joined the AFLA at that time (*Amateur Fencing League of America*), which is now the United States Fencing Association and he's still active in it. It was in 1952 that he joined that organization. It's been fifty-one years and he's still volunteering. So much for David's staying power when he commits to achieving a goal. They had a huge competition about a week ago and he directed that event for four hours. No, his heart murmur hasn't even begun to slow him down.

David affirmed that he believed that for most people a sedentary existence is a disaster. Even after thirty years of being a fencing coach for the Brentwood High School Fencing Team, when he retired he couldn't stay out of it so he coaches now at a private club on Monday and Wednesday nights. He kept up with his skills as a fencer for twenty-one years. He was a coach of the Long Island Teams for the Empire State Games and also competed in his own right. He got many medals for that on the Masters level. He and Jeff Wolfe worked together for a good number of years but Jeff retired earlier than David. Jeff, according to David, misses it terribly as he would have done if he'd gone cold turkey. Jeff is talking to David about donating his time there shortly.

His first year in Brentwood was 1961 -1962. He was living in Brooklyn and hired by the District because he'd already accrued two years experience teaching in New Jersey. When he applied in Brentwood they were impressed by his experience. Pete Curillo was the Music Supervisor and David was interviewed by Michael De Bellis, the South Junior High School Principal, The Assistant Principal at that time was Jeff Dwyer.

The Principal of South Jr High School had been Lenny Sachs but recently had resigned to open *The Mark Country Day School*, a Private Educational venture in Bay Shore. It continues to thrive today. When David returned to complete his hiring process he asked if he still had a job because the person who had hired him had quit. He was reminded that he hadn't been hired by an Administrator his contract was with the Brentwood School District itself. Also, during the interview with Mike De Bellis a phone call was put through to Pete Curello, District Music Supervisor asking if he'd like to come over and participate in the interview to which he responded, "*No thanks. I trust you.*" They didn't meet until sometime later and have remained good friends ever since.

David remembered meeting Donna Wyette, an experienced teacher when he arrived at South and being very impressed by her. She was one of the nicest people you'd ever want to meet and she had an eighth and ninth grade chorus. Being a new teacher, he said, she helped him immeasurably. He started a seventh and eighth grade girl's choir that did very well and some of those people were just outstanding. Then when West Junior High School opened up he was asked if he'd like to become the first music teacher in West Junior High and Jeff Dwyer took over as Principal of West, so David said, "*I'd be glad to*". When he got there he started a ninth grade chorus. They did very well. When he took them to contests they did superbly, and some of the boys in his chorus were wrestlers. Good fellows whose names even today are remembered; there are pictures of them in the high school, Bob Bender, Carl Adams who became an international wrestler in college representing the United States I never taught at the high school but I did coach – 7th through 12th since I had kids that started out on my team 7th – 12th were on my team for six years because if there's no Junior High School group in your sport you can join the High School Team. So I had kids coming out of 7th, 8th, ninth grade and by the time they got to 9th grade some of them were pretty good. David of course, had his own purpose for coming to Coach every day. He said it

was his love of music and he also believed that he was a natural; a born teacher who could impart his love of music from the time he was fifteen to eighteen and developed his heart murmur, he listened to music on the radio and read every music book he could find. *"I remember one of the first composers I really began to enjoy, a man named Hector Berlioz, and this year 2003 they're celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of his birth – this whole year, Hector Berlioz"*. And his brother, being a violist, went to the Juilliard School of Music in NYC, from 1946 - 1949 and (*"he was too busy to collect records but I wasn't"*), so I became a collector of records also, so now I have 5,000 records in my basement (*My wife says, 'the records can stay, but you go'.*) *We both only knew one other collector of records that could compete with David's collection and that was a District employee who worked at IMC (Instructional Media Center), and we both exclaimed his name in perfect unison when we announced - - Joe Spano; a good friend, David said.* He was the only person I ever knew who had an actual recording made by Enrico Caruso, except perhaps Nick Siciliano.

In order *'to make ends meet'* as we used to say, David sold shoes for sixteen years to adults in Bay Shore at Greens Shoe Store and kids shoes at Stride Rite in the Mall.

There were two things that he said he was not going to do when he retired. He would not teach and he would not sell. Fencing was Coaching it wasn't the same as teaching. However, he's now parting with certain of his records on E-Bay, that are duplicates or those with considerable enhanced value. For instance he had just sold a record for \$270 to a fellow in Switzerland that he had picked up for 50c. He felt good about that one.

He just retired last year after twenty-one years as the Long Island Coach for the Empire State Games and he won his last gold medal at the age of sixty-nine when the Empire State Games were on Long Island and when my wife, my daughter, my son-in-law and two of my three grandchildren were there to watch me. I was very pleased about that.

Even now twice a month for two hours every other Wednesday, he broadcasts for WUSB Stony Brook a Classical Music Radio Broadcast that he's

hosted for twenty-one years. He is in his twenty-second year of that community service.

The last assignment David had when he was under contract to the Brentwood School District was at South East Elementary School, where in his first year he gave an award to a young man for being the best music student and someone for whom he was very proud. Of course that student had worked with other teachers before but David was particularly proud of him as a Brentwood alumni who'd distinguished himself as a student. His name was Frank Cannon Jr. David had known and taught Frank Cannon Sr.'s younger sons as well and had taught other members of the Cannon family prior to him. That same Frank Jr. is now teaching music in Brentwood. The Community recently lost his father who was both a devoted public servant and a long serving member of the Brentwood Board of Education. David considered him a good friend all through the years. As a measure of the high esteem in which Frank Sr. was held, the name of an elementary school in Brentwood was changed in his honor to memorialize his dedication to the community when Southeast Elementary School was dedicated and became The Frank J. Cannon Southeast Elementary School.

His first year as a full time teacher of Music for the Brentwood Schools David didn't wish to remember he earned the less than staggering amount of \$5,000.

From the very beginning of his career he has always tried to approach it with a great degree of seriousness. When he went to the South East Elementary school he started with the Manhattan Curriculum and then with Music Appreciation when he taught at the Junior High School; taught them about the instruments of the orchestra how they made families of instruments, and played the music. And there was one piece that he played for two years in New Jersey and thirty years here to every senior class that he had, he played it whether it was sixth graders or eighth graders he tried to play one work called 'The Planets', by Gustav Holzmänn. *"That was an educational experience that I never tired of and the kids enjoyed it tremendously. You still felt the emotion every time they*

performed the piece". Oh, he said "*I did*". You convey it if you feel it and I know they enjoyed it. For instance, I tried things that I know that they would feel. I played a work called "Bolero" by Revel. And I asked the kids before I started to play it, "*How many of you think that you would enjoy listening to a piece of music that would last about fourteen or fifteen minutes and doesn't change. It's the same melody throughout the whole work. What will change is the instruments but basically it's the same melody and the same rhythm, the bolero rhythm, How many people would think they might enjoy hearing that?*" "*There was not a single hand raised. And then at the end of the work as it gets stronger and louder and louder, to crescendo and I can see they're getting more and more involved in it and I can see their feet tapping and their bodies reacting, and their fingers moving, and I'd say how many people really enjoyed that? I'd see the whole class raise their hands. I would try to do what I appreciated especially when I was young and growing up*". And listening to the record and listening to the music. I tried to use that as a basis. One of my students that I had for the first six years of his life – first through sixth grade, I'm not including Kindergarten because I never did that was a young man, and the only thing that he's known for now is that he's the Music Supervisor of Commack Schools. Paul Infante. And I remember him so well.

While I was still growing up and in my teens I belonged to a group called "*American Youth and Democracy*". (AYD) I remember going out and collecting nickels and dimes to fight Senator Theodore Gilmore Bilbo from Mississippi. He was a right wing racist and a registered member of the Ku Klux Klan.

David on the other hand, said he *has*, "*Always loved the differences in people that are what make our country so great.*" That was certainly one of the qualities that made Brentwood so attractive to both he and I and others as the kind of community in which we most wanted to teach. When he arrived here he said the local demographics reflected a place where 50% of the residents were white, 30% were Hispanic, 20% Black and we both had wonderful students in each of those groups.

As we began to approach the end of our hour together David asked if I was familiar with the television program called Actors Studio and its host David Lipton to which I answered in the affirmative. Did I know that part of the show when the

host asked guests for a favorite word? Yes, I said, *"I did"*. He couldn't fathom why no guest had ever offered the word he then proposed to us as his favorite – *"Create"*. Create interest in your subject so that people will leave your class interested in your subject, inspired by new ideas, motivated to *'create'* change in the world through each other, and by means of our communities. Every life, every community after all, is a world in a nutshell and after all, don't each of us live in a world of our own creation? Imagine a Kindergarten class full of five year olds. Look, that you might say, *"each in their own bright nebula unfurled, each face, Dear God, a world."*