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## IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION

by Jonathan Wilson

Gratuitously, I'd like to suggest how to "fix" our education system. If you're a mean spirited penny-pincher with little concern for the preservation of our democracy long-term, you can stop reading here.

Everyone seems to agree that public education in the United States is broken. We all know that the quality of our compulsory public education system has been in decline nationally and here in Iowa. And, for a LONG time it has gotten progressively less FREE (i.e., parents have to pay, often beyond their means, for materials, fees, etc.). I personally trace the start of the decline back about 50 years, or thereabouts, when we released women who wanted careers to pursue other than teaching, nursing, and secretarial work. Until then, we had half of our best and brightest citizens held captive to those -- worthy enough but not the most lucrative -- occupations. Those best and brightest who chose teaching provided a hidden subsidy to the public school system -- the system was getting "something for nothing." When able, those best and brightest chose other careers in droves. It left some of our best and brightest in the classroom, but fewer and fewer over time as the opportunity for alternative, more lucrative careers continued to soak into the collective consciousness. The hidden subsidy was lost and never replaced, and the decline began.

I start from the premise that the critical building block for preserving our democracy is QUALITY, FREE, COMPULSORY public education. That also happens to be the critical building block for maintaining America's international competitive edge in innovation, productivity, and business.

There are four prongs to "fixing" the problem of quality decline. (1) **Research and Development** -- we need to do far more intentional, educational R&D so that any and all "fixes" are real and not just re-arrangement of what already exists. The curriculum needs to be current, comprehensive, and competitive by international standards. Education delivery needs to be informed and effective. (2) **Enhanced teacher preparation** -- that is dependent upon rigorous accreditation standards for all teacher preparation institutions. You are probably not aware that several years ago all three Iowa state universities and Drake University dropped NCATE accreditation for their teacher prep schools, and NCATE is the most rigorous and ONLY national accreditation agency endorsed by the US Department of Education. Accreditation was dropped in the name of saving money. (3) **Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for EVERY student.** Currently IEPs only exist for "special education" students -- every child should be so lucky. (4) **Funding** -- you knew I was going to get there -- to attract into teaching and keep there the best and the brightest, and to provide whatever each student needs to achieve his/her potential according to a continuously monitored IEP. That would include whatever those individual needs might be, whether it's regular meals, tutoring, help with homework, health care, medications, counseling, coaching, an optimum teacher-student ratio -- you name it. Imagine attending such a school. Imagine the outcomes that could be achieved for every student. Imagine applying, not equal resources per student (which we aren't even doing today) but, rather, extra resources in keeping with the extra-ordinary needs of each student, whatever they might be.

Beyond those four, and implicit in them, it all should be completely FREE to the parents. No fees, no expense for books, no cost for materials, no charge for band uniforms or athletic uni-

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## CALENDAR

▼ The next FFBC meeting is 7:00 A.M., Friday, April 2, 2010 at Hoyt Sherman Place.

R.S.V.P. by Tuesday March 30 to [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or 288-2500 by phone.

forms. No cost for a nutritious lunch. Heck, we should have school uniforms at no charge. Every kid should have an equal opportunity to participate in every aspect of a quality education without creating a financial hardship for the parents. A child's opportunity should not be dependent upon its parents' appreciation for a good education. Depending on parents for uniformly high educational expectations and the resources to match them locks us inevitably into recurring cycles of under-education, disadvantage, poverty, and under-achievement. That's what we've been doing. If we keep doing it we are destined to the same, disappointing results.

The potential of the individual and, collectively, of our society, will remain a pipe dream without these four prongs of reform. Without them, public education will continue in decline, so will our international competitive edge, and the preservation of our democracy will continue to be in real jeopardy.

We need to spend more money, not just for the sake of spending more money or paying existing teachers more. We need to spend more money SMART in order to implement these four prongs of reform. Until we make that commitment, talk of improving public education will remain mere rhetoric. Such talk will be nothing more than a call to rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic. We can, and should, do better for the sake of our children, our future, and the future of our democracy.

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*Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.*

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## **Breakfast with the Mayor of Des Moines**

**By Bruce Carr**

*Before the Main Event of our March 5 meeting, we all stood to welcome and honor Brenda Pringle, known to many of us as the telephone voice of the FFBC and the "goddess in the details" of managing our roster, handling correspondence about membership and scholarships, issuing meeting and other reminders and, in general, keeping the organization running smoothly. Ms. Pringle (who in her day job is FFBC president Jonathan Wilson's secretary at his law firm) was presented with a signed card and a gift in grateful recognition of her many services to us. Graciously ignoring the introductory remark that she has "put up with Jonathan for 27 years"--true!--Brenda responded with a small, elegant, and obviously heartfelt speech, returning thanks to us for broadening her own understanding of our mission during the 14 years of our existence. "It wasn't so long ago," she noted, "that I was taking telephone death-threats for my boss--and see how far we've come today!"*

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Our speaker on March 5 was His Honor the Mayor of Des Moines, Frank Cownie, who regaled us with some tales and

details of his attendance at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (the "Copenhagen Summit") in Denmark last December. He described with good humor and a certain measure of surprise the conference's extensive security arrangements: the Summit's thorough and repeated credential-checking resulted in enormous lines of delegates and others seeking to attend the meetings. Organizers were surprised to attract 24,000 people, and some of the highest-level meetings were limited to 90 attendees, including himself he was pleased to note.

Cownie made the Copenhagen trip (which was not, he emphasized, paid for with taxpayer funds) as a member of the ICLEI delegation to the conference, a delegation with 1,200 members including 600 from the US. And why would local-government leaders want to participate in deliberations with international Heads of State? Because, he said, whatever the Heads agree to do about sustainability, the real work will be done at the local level--actual projects will be implemented and directed by local communities around the world--and those local communities must be represented. Cownie also cited his recent testimony before the US Congress, which described recent devastating floods across Iowa, and he pointed out that it is not just coastal cities that must be prepared to deal with the consequences of natural disasters. He also pointed out that local governments are already planning and executing without waiting for international decisions and guidelines; they have no choice.

Cownie's presentation got unavoidably wonky once or twice, for so early in the morning, but the consensus was certainly that we are fortunate to have such a thoughtful, informed, and forward-looking Mayor in our City Hall.

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The Copenhagen Summit was held at the [Bella Center in Copenhagen, Denmark](#), between 7 December and 18 December 2009. The conference included the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the [United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and the 5th Meeting of the Parties (COP/MOP 5) to the [Kyoto Protocol](#).

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ICLEI -- Local Governments for Sustainability [www.iclei.org/](http://www.iclei.org/) -- is an international association of local governments as well as national and regional local government organizations that have made a commitment to sustainable development. ICLEI was founded in 1990 when more than 200 local governments from 43 countries convened for an inaugural conference, the World Congress of Local Governments for a Sustainable Future, at the United Nations in New York. Over 1124 cities, towns, counties, and their associations worldwide comprise ICLEI's growing membership. ICLEI works with these and hundreds of other local governments through international, performance-based, results-oriented campaigns and programs. Its four current initiatives target [Resilient Communities and Cities](#), [Just and Peaceful Communities](#), [Viable Local Economies](#), and [Eco-efficient Cities](#). ICLEI provides technical consulting, training, and information services to build capacity, share knowledge, and support local government in the implementation of sustainable development at the local level.



# TRUE/FALSE Film Festival

Review by Gary Kaufman

In Columbia, Missouri, I attended the TRUE/FALSE Film Festival the last weekend in February. It's a multi-theater documentary film festival. Those in charge review over 700 films before selecting those to be shown at the 4-day event. Generally, any film shown is introduced by someone from the film's production, and they are available for questions and answers afterward. For just \$60 you get a pass to see as many films as you want beginning at 10 a.m. and continuing until midnight. The selection is incredible. The theaters are all in downtown Columbia, a college town with many eclectic shops. The downtown also has many fun restaurants and a college-town ambience. And, it's also swarming with documentary movie enthusiasts, which makes the event electric. Each showing is packed, and many are lubricated with wine and liquor. One of the most beautiful venues is the Missouri Theater, a restored movie palace originally built in 1928. In addition to the great venues, attendees enjoy a strange array of musicians before each movie begins. And the movies? Well, here's a sampler:

**SMASH HIS CAMERA** is a documentary of Ron Galella, the godfather of American paparazzi. He does capture absolutely incredible celebrity photos -- his specialty being Jacqueline Onassis -- but no celebrity should have to endure such hounding by photographers everywhere. They amazingly show him crashing a Robert Redford event. You would think that someone who is being filmed while crashing an event would be caught, but there he is shown handing Robert Redford a copy of his photography book.

**WAKING SLEEPING BEAUTY** is a wonderful documentary taking the audience from the low depths of the Disney Animated Studio to its evolution into its current creative success. Roy Disney believed that animation was the backbone of the Disney Studio and he didn't want it to fail. You also have in the film the conflicts of powerful characters like Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenburg. The film features footage of a very young Tim Burton and a group of fun and talented animators.

**THE RED CHAPEL** was pretty weird. The director tries to show what it is like inside the totalitarian regime of North Korea by having two Korean-Danish comedians present a play as a sort of cultural exchange. The play is intentionally horrible. One of the comedians is, as he calls himself, a "spaz" -- a disabled person -- a class of person that seems to be absent in North Korea, and there are rumors that people with such conditions are treated harshly or even put to death. The whole exchange attempt gets especially weird as the North Koreans manipulate what can be shown and the comedians find themselves on national television in the midst of a massive march of support for the Korean leader. Truly bizarre.

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*Activism for most people is whatever someone else is doing.*

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**THE INVENTION OF DR. NAKAMATS** is about the "fantabulous" 80-year old inventor of 3,357 inventions, including the floppy disk. He apparently is famously known throughout Japan, but comes off as kind of a nut. One of his inventions is a love potion that he claims to have tested on over 10,000 women. "Of course, I am not doing the sex. I am checking the meters," says the real-life nutty professor.

**UTOPIA IN FOUR MOVEMENTS** was a unique experience because the documentary was composed live for the audience. The narrator did his narration live, and would change the visuals based on images and segments he had in his computer, and someone in the back did the same putting together the music and sounds. The event was to illustrate how Americans used to dream of Utopia -- a better place. They don't seem to be doing that now. These two creative people set out to capture the optimistic spirit of a by-gone era. The presentation explores the language Esperanto, which was thought to be a cure for a lot of human strife since it would be possible for all humans to speak the same language and thus understand each other. For this high purpose, Esperanto was invented and given quite a push. In fact, they even show an excerpt of a feature-length film that was done entirely in Esperanto starring a very young William Shatner. Shopping malls were originally invented as part of the Utopia movement; they were to provide parks and daycare, but the developers had a tendency to drop

(Continued on page 4)

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*Life is an eventually terminal exercise in surviving a multiplicity of "lotteries" -- beating the odds in every field of human endeavor, until we finally lose.*

## BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the April 2 meeting no later than March 31. E-mail [JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or call him at 288-2500. Our next speaker will be Democratic candidate for U.S. Senator, Roxanne Conlin.

▼ ▼ ▼  
Thanks Scott Kleinfelter for introducing our March speaker, Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie.

▼ ▼ ▼  
Thanks to Brad Holland for handling the Book Exchange for the March 5 meeting.

▼ ▼ ▼  
Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome.

## Film Festival (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

those features when the malls were actually built. The whole multi-media event felt like you were participating in a happening. It was very good and creative.

**THE OATH** was presented by its director, Laura Poitras, who won the True Vision award at the festival. It's a documentary about two brothers-in-law, one of whom was imprisoned in Cuba by the United States merely because he had once been a driver for Osama Bin Laden.

**GasLand** is a movie that just makes you so mad you want to drag every Congressman down from the Hill and make them watch the movie. One of the outcomes of the Cheney energy meetings after the 9/11 attacks was getting Congress to make the extraction of oil and gas exempt from all U. S. environmental laws. This movie documents the practice of "fracking," where undocumented chemicals are drilled and then forced deep into the ground which then releases trapped natural gas. Where this has been done, people living nearby have natural gas getting into their water supply system to the point that a person could actually light a running faucet and it would maintain a strong flame. Extraction companies don't have to report what they are putting into the ground to extract the gas because it's a protected "trade secret." This needs to change. Everyone should see this film.

**WASTE LAND** is a movie in which an artist known for making art out of ordinary things wants to make a difference in people's lives with an art project. He heads to the world's largest landfill outside Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where people make their living harvesting recyclable materials. Eventually he befriends many of the workers and creates their images in garbage across the floor of an enormous warehouse. He then takes a photo and it's sold at auction in New York for \$25,000 or so. The proceeds are given to the union that represents the workers. The workers are genuinely moved by the art and the opportunity to go to New York and see themselves displayed in the galleries there.

Alas, I ran out of time and had to head home. It was my first multi-theater film festival. I highly recommend attending this festival sometime if you like documentary films. Columbia is only about a 4-hour drive from Des Moines and both the town and the TRUE/FALSE Film Festival are great experiences. Check it out on the web at [www.TrueFalse.Org](http://www.TrueFalse.Org).

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*If 4 out of 5 people SUFFER from diarrhea . . . does that mean that one out of 5 enjoys it?*

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*Learn the rules so you know how to break them properly.*

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## First Friday Breakfast Club

Allen Vander Linden  
and Jonathan Wilson

The First Friday Breakfast Club came into existence in January 1996. As an association of gay and bisexual men, it has been the largest breakfast club in the state of Iowa from its inception. It meets on the first Friday of every month (thus the name) at Hoyt Sherman Place, 15th and Woodland, Des Moines. There are usually 65 or more in attendance to network, provide mutual support, learn from distinguished speakers, and demonstrate a more positive image of gay men.

Guest speakers have included Governors, a United States Ambassador, members of Congress, the mother of Matthew Shepard, the Chief Justice of the Iowa Supreme Court, the authors of the district court and Supreme Court same-gender marriage decisions, and the majority leaders of both chambers of the Iowa Legislature. National leaders in the movement to achieve civil equality have appeared, including the executive directors of PFLAG and GLAAD.

An important program of the First Friday Breakfast Club is promoting education around GLBT issues in Iowa schools and communities. Scholarship awards in the amount of \$2,500 are made to high school seniors who have contributed significantly to the reduction of homophobia and increasing awareness and tolerance of GLBT students and related issues. Since 1997 nearly \$100,000 has been awarded to 70 students from across Iowa.

Recent scholarship winners have formed Gay-Straight Alliances; worked with school administrators to develop and implement policies to provide a safe environment for GLBT students; made class presentations and led discussions to educate fellow students and school staff; led activities such as day of silence and "trans" day observances; lobbied at the State Capitol; addressed church groups; conducted student surveys; led training for school administrators and students on transgender issues; written articles on GLBT issues for community and school newspapers; and worked with statewide organizations like One Iowa and Pridenet.

Additional education inevitably takes place when an FFBC representative presents the scholarship award at the school's annual awards program, often to an audience of folks who think they've never before seen a real, live gay person. Hearts are moved, minds are changed, and the climate in our state is improved.

New members are always welcome. Visit the website: [www.ffbc-iowa.org](http://www.ffbc-iowa.org), or call Jonathan Wilson, 515-288-2500.

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*Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind." Dr. Seuss*

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# All in the Family or How I Dodged the Proverbial Bullet

By Fred Mount

It started on a Thursday in June and was over by Saturday at 9:45 a.m. Before it was over I'd be handcuffed and read my rights.

It started with a collect call from my Texas nephew Gary, age 36. Gary had always been "difficult." He was calling from the Des Moines Bus Depot and wanted to visit me at my home in Marshalltown. He'd arrived in Des Moines with only the clothes on his back, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, and no money. He hadn't eaten in several days and told me he had been panhandling for money to eat. I dutifully drove to Des Moines to get him and, on the ride home, asked him the whereabouts of his wife Becky. He said, "I don't know." Knowing him to have a violent temper, I decided it was prudent not to push for too many answers.

On Friday I took him to the local K-Mart to purchase clothing and shoes. Then I took him home and I went back to my job. When I returned home about 5p.m., Gary was drinking beer and had had more than enough to prompt incoherent comments about the CIA, Cherokee Indians, and other disjointed topics.

Later that evening I took him to visit another nephew and his wife who also lived in Marshalltown. His wife and I had a conversation about why Gary was in Iowa and how I was going to get him out of my house, while my two nephews had their own conversation. My Marshalltown nephew called some other family members after Gary and I left, all of whom agreed with his concerns, and all agreed that something should be done to protect me.

I didn't get much sleep that night. I decided Gary had to go the next morning, early, before he got into the booze again. Before he got up I'd called the Des Moines Bus Depot for bus schedules and prices to get him back to Texas, and made plans to drive him back to Des Moines. When he woke up I mustered my courage and told him firmly that he would no longer be welcome. To my relief, he was remarkably docile and we left promptly for Des Moines.

In the meantime, my Marshalltown nephew had contacted the police to have them run a computer check to see if Gary was wanted for anything in Texas.

Unbeknownst to me, the criminal check produced information serious enough to warrant assembly of a SWAT team to cordon off the streets around my house. Eventually they determined that we were gone and found the note I'd left about our destination.

The trip to Des Moines was un-eventful until about Bondurant. I noticed a Highway Patrol car in my rear-view mirror. He did not attempt to pass or stop me. As we reached the entrance ramp to Interstate 80 from Highway 65, I exited and suddenly all hell broke loose. Trooper and Sheriff cars came at me from all directions with lights flashing and sirens blaring. It was like a war had started. I pulled the car over to a stop and

could see drawn hand-guns in all three rear-view mirrors. We were ordered out of the car with our hands above our heads. I was ordered to throw the car keys on the ground, and to walk backwards to the sound of the voice behind me. When I reached the trooper, I was handcuffed, had my rights read to me, and taken behind a patrol car and told to get on my knees with my head down to the roadway. At this point I asked what had "he" done, and they told me Gary was wanted for murder and mutilation of his wife. I never saw Gary again. He did not resist arrest and was taken away.

As it turned out, he'd killed his wife a few days before fleeing to Iowa, and dismembered the body in an attempt to dispose of it. I'll spare you the gory details.

After Gary was taken away the troopers all shook hands with me and made an apology for my treatment, but explained they were only protecting me. Relieved to be rid of Gary, and still shaking, I got back in my car and returned to Marshalltown, happy not to have to pay for his trip back to Texas. Taxpayers would be picking up that tab.

And the sequel to the story: for several years Gary avoided trial on the murder charges because of his compromised mental state. Eventually he was tried and found not guilty by reason of insanity. He remains institutionalized to this day. And why the hydrogen peroxide? You tell me. If you can you're probably as nuts as my nephew.

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*God personified is infinitely diminished.*—J. Wilson

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## Cownie (Continued)

By an FFBC member

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Thomas Michael Franklin "Frank" Cownie owns and operates Cownie Furs (est. 1905), a store that has been in his family for generations. Scion of a political family in Des Moines, both of his parents served on the school board here. He attended Roosevelt High School and [Iowa State University](#). Before being elected mayor (in 2004; re-elected in 2007 with nearly 80 percent of the vote), he served previously for two years as an at-large member of the City Council. He also served several terms on the Plan and Zoning Commission and was chairperson of Downtown Des Moines, Inc.

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*Do Lipton Tea employees take coffee breaks?*

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*Whatever happened to preparations A through G?*

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# FFBC

*First Friday  
News & Views  
Des Moines, Iowa*

*APRIL 2010*

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## My M.O. (Monthly Observations) Of Style, Dictionaries, Inanities, and Redundancies

The dumbing down of American English continues its unfortunate slide into apathy, fueled by popular misuse of everyday words and phrases, especially on television news casts. It should be required of every student who is graduated from an American high school to own and frequently refer to Strunk and White's **The Elements of Style**. Said **The New York Times**, "Buy it, study it, enjoy it. It's as timeless as a book can be in our age of volubility."

This slim volume of English usage has gone through many editions since William Strunk, Jr., first penned it in 1918. E. B. White, a former student of Strunk, revised the book in 1959, thirteen years after Strunk's death. The latest edition, published in 2009, incorporates many of the changes that have occurred with the language as it adapts to the times.

If I had the power to erase some bad habits that persist among the population, I would make sure that all speakers and writers of English knew the distinctions between *less* and *fewer* and *farther* and *further*.

*Less* refers to quantity, and *fewer* to number. According to **The Elements of Style**: "His troubles are less than mine" means "His troubles are not so great as mine." "His troubles are fewer than mine" means "His troubles are not so numerous as mine." *Farther* serves best as a distance word, *further* as a time or quantity word. "You chase a ball *farther* than the other fellow; you pursue a subject *further*." These are just two of the simple concepts covered in this amazingly concise book of usage.

In addition to **The Elements of Style**, I would also encourage every American who writes or speaks publicly to own and use **The American Heritage College Dictionary**. This invaluable reference work tracks the patterns of American usage of English with updated editions and a Usage Panel that pinpoints why certain words change in their usage and meaning. I would further encourage dictionary users to employ the preferred usages of words even though secondary usages may be noted. Examples include the predilection of many Americans to turn regular verbs into irregular ones. Take the verb *plead*. Time after time, you will hear its past tense as *pled*, when, in fact, *plead* is a regular verb and its correct past tense is *pleaded*. The same goes for the past tense of *sneak*. The correct past tense is *sneaked*, not *snuck*.

Likewise, we are bombarded with redundancies and just plain unexplainable usages every day. I shudder every time I see that I am to receive a *free gift*. By its very definition, a gift is free to the recipient. The word *free* is unnecessary, and yet advertising has made such an impact with this freak of English that most people think it is correct usage. How about *very unique*? Actually, there is no such thing. If something is unique it is one of a kind and cannot have any enhancing qualifier before it.

Have you ever heard something being touted as, "The First Annual (whatever)?" It is impossible to have a first annual ANYTHING! Until the second occasion comes along, no one knows if the first one will be repeated.

English survives because of its ability to adapt, but it also is a language that has many basics that need to be mastered in order to make sense in an increasingly complex world. Perhaps the one writer who used and understood English better than others was George Bernard Shaw. His **Pygmalion** (later **My Fair Lady**) demonstrates how English usage distinguishes one person from another.

Steve Person