

Robert “Bob” O’Brien (AWHS Faculty 1954-1992)



The Archbishop Williams community has lost a kind, humble, faith-filled friend with the passing of Robert “Bob” O’Brien, a former history teacher at our school from 1954-1992. Mr. O’Brien passed away on March 15 after a battle with cancer.

Visiting hours will be held on Thursday, March 18 from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Magni & Son Funeral Home, 365 Watertown Street on Route 16 in Newton. His Funeral Mass will be held on Friday at 10:00 a.m. at St. Ignatius Loyola Church, 28 Commonwealth Ave., Route 30 in Chestnut Hill.

During the past few years, numerous alumni found that their teacher/mentor became a dear and valued friend. To say that he taught U.S. History, World History, Problems of Democracy, International Conflict, Game Theory and Religion during those years would only scratch the surface of the impact he made on the lives of so many in the AWHS community. Several shared their impressions.

“He was a teacher’s teacher. Bob spent hours above and beyond what would be expected in planning and preparing his classes. He challenged his students! He made them think. He made them question.” - *John Donoghue (AWHS 1960), former AWHS Assistant Principal*

“I hated U.S. History the first semester with Mr. O’Brien. I could not do an outline the way he wanted it done, I could not do a crossword puzzle with history terms and I had no idea how to interpret his cartoons or understand quotes from some historical figure. But, by the end of the year I thought Mr. O’Brien was the best teacher I have ever had. I still believe that.” - *Quote from a member of AWHS 1962*

“I do what I do because of Mr. O’Brien. I’m very grateful our life paths crossed.” - *Gerry Golden (AWHS 1965), history teacher at Sacred Heart High School in Kingston*

When Bob became ill earlier this year, one alumnus asked for his address “so I can write to him to thank him for all he did for me.”- *Mike Connor (AWHS 1989), Head of the History Department at North Quincy High School High School*

After graduating from Cambridge High & Latin School in 1943, Mr. O’Brien was awarded a full four-year scholarship to M.I.T. He completed his freshman year before he was inducted into the U.S. Army. He had always been interested in military affairs, and after his service in the Army the interest expanded into military history and theory. He returned to college and earned a bachelor of arts in history from the College of the Holy Cross in 1953 and a Master of Arts degree in history from Boston College in 1954.

In 1954, Sister Virginia Maria, SCN, the first principal of AWHS, felt it was important that more lay men to be added to the faculty in a co-educational school. As a result of this decision, Mr. O’Brien began teaching in September, 1954.

He taught at Archbishop Williams for 38 years, changing a countless number of lives along the way. In addition to teaching, he served as moderator of the debate team. From 1970-1977, he also managed the

graduation ceremony organizing all the integral details. The Principals at AWHHS looked to Bob for advice. He was supportive, fair and, above all, honest. Faculty colleagues looked to Bob as a mentor, confidant and friend.

Upon his retirement, the school established the Robert O'Brien Award, which is presented annually to the graduating senior who has maintained the highest four-year average in history while exhibiting a capacity for scholarship, critical thinking and analytical writing.

Although he officially retired from teaching at AWHHS in 1992, Mr. O'Brien remained involved with the school, attending many social events, including the 60th anniversary celebration in November, and reunions along with Martha, his wife of 54 years.

This past October, his family looked on with pride as the Archbishop Williams community honored Mr. O'Brien by inducting him in the first Academic Hall of Fame. When the Academic Hall of Fame was first introduced, several emails and calls from alumni stated that Mr. O'Brien had to be among the first inducted. One alumnus noted, "Mr. O'Brien stands out as a teacher who not only taught subject matter, but also taught us how to be better students."

The following is an excerpt from Mr. O'Brien's remarks at the Academic Hall of Fame induction:

"Every life has its good days and its bad days. But on any given day it is not always clear whether in the long run that day will be rated as a good day or a bad day.

On December 28, 1871, James A. Garfield, who later became the 20th President of the United States, was undoubtedly having one of his good days. Speaking to a reunion of his fellow Williams alumni (that other Williams), he described his idea of an ideal college. All that is really needed, he said, is a student on one end of a log and the great Mark Hopkins on the other end of the log. (Hopkins was then the President of Williams College, had been a teacher there for over fifty years and was well known and respected by everyone at that reunion.) Ten years later, Garfield had one of his really bad days when a well-aimed bullet from the pistol of an assassin brought an early end to his Presidential career.

On April 11, 1945, a stray bullet from the pistol of my squad leader brought an early end to my ambitions for an active military career. For some time, that day seemed destined to be rated one of the really bad days of my life. My military interests were forced into more academic channels. But one day nine years later, in April, 1954, as I was finishing my study for a Master's in history at Boston College, I casually dropped into the Placement Office. From that came an interview at Archbishop Williams, then in its 5th year of existence. I had never even heard of Archie's and – frankly -- did not know exactly where Braintree was. But Sister Virginia Maria, the first Principal, hired me and I stayed on for 38 happy years.

Today, looking back on those 38 years, I would like to revisit Garfield's description of an ideal school – and give it a little tweaking. Of course, the ideal school needs a good teacher on one end of the log – and Archie's has had plenty of those. But even more important, it seems to me, is having great students at the other end of the log. And that is the kind of student I encountered in abundance at Archie's, year after year, many of who, are here today and a mere sample of whom are being inducted today into the Academic Hall of Fame. So I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those great students for making my 38 happy years at Archie's so full of good days. And especially for making that day in April of 1945, my own "bad-bullet day," now seem like a pretty good day, after all. Thank you to all of you for coming and making today one of the very good days of my life."

The family has requested that in lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Robert O'Brien Award at Archbishop Williams High School, 40 Independence Ave., Braintree, MA 02184.