Doc Farber’s Life of Public Service: “Consider the Possibilities”

Editor’s Note: This Perspective is the second in a series of reflections about ASPA’s founders in commemoration of the Society’s 75th anniversary.

His formal name was W. O. “Bill” Farber, but to students, administrators, and friends alike, he was simply “Doc,” a born teacher with a PhD in political science and an appetite for knowledge that knew no bounds.

Doc Farber came to the University of South Dakota at the height of the Great Depression and dedicated his life to the students of that prairie institution. He never married, but he had a family larger than anyone else in the state—all the young people who had been the beneficiaries of his friendship, counseling, and instruction.

Doc didn’t confine his advice to political science majors. He had a radar system that alerted him to problems for an accounting major or a star athlete, a faculty member or a local merchant. I watched him on many occasions, his rotund figure bouncing across campus, as he stopped a student to quietly confer and pat the young man or woman on the back and move on.

His home on a street bordering the campus was famous for its homecoming daiquiri parties and reunions of former students. It was not unusual to see a freshman chatting up the governor or a senator, all of whom were students of Doc.

He was famous for his aphorisms, such as “Consider the possibilities!” which he repeated to me when he tried to persuade me to join the CIA. When I demurred, he said, “Consider the possibilities! You could start a coup in Guatemala.” And then he burst into laughter.

We could never pin down his political affiliation. As best we could tell, he was a Republican when they were in office and a Democrat when they held power. He needed friends in both parties to get the grants that financed many student studies of local and state government or tribal politics.

When I lost my way for a time, Bill counseled me to drop out for a while and “get all the wine and women out of your system.”

It worked. I returned, working full time and attending classes full time. It was the most important advice of my young life.

When I graduated, I still didn’t have a job, so Doc drove me to Omaha, where we had heard of an opening.

I got the job, and Doc stayed in close touch for the rest of my career. When I began to get honorary degrees, one of the schools called him to ask about my undergraduate scholarship.

Bill said, laughing, “To be honest, we thought the degree we gave him was honorary.”

When he died, the flags across the state were flown at half staff, a unique tribute to a university professor who “always considered the possibilities.”