Greg Farrell Tribute

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I am writing with the very sad news that Greg Farrell passed away last night from complications associated with leukemia. He was 84 years old and lived a life that was filled with adventure, purpose, and accomplishment. He leaves behind a coterie of Greg Farrell acolytes, which includes me along with hundreds of others who he inspired, supported and mentored, and who loved him deeply.

As many of you are aware, Greg played a seminal role in the history of our organization. Indeed, if NYC Outward Bound Schools has a founding father, it is Greg Farrell. It was Greg who had the vision of bringing Outward Bound to New York City and its public schools, and it was Greg who, in his capacity as the executive director of the Fund for the City of NY, acted upon that vision by bringing together a planning group in 1986 that began sketching out what an Outward Bound Center that was focused on bringing Outward Bound’s lessons and activities to NYC’s young people could look like. That planning group included Arthur Sulzberger, Bill Phillips, George Miles, Rochelle Evans, Bill Abelow and several other members of our founding generation to whom our organization owes its existence.

And when NYC Outward Bound was born in 1987, it was Greg who not only served as a founding Board member, but for all intents and purposes, was its first executive director, providing it with the credibility, direction and solid foundation it needed to get off the ground. Greg was also the person who first brought me into the NYC Outward Bound orbit (I was working for him at the Fund for the City of NY and he persuaded me to participate in the first course we ever ran in September, 1987), and it was his faith in me and his unyielding support that made me feel like I had a chance of success when I took on the role of executive director in 1989. That faith and that support never wavered over the ensuing three decades and I count them among the most precious gifts that I have received in my lifetime. In the best tradition of Outward Bound, he saw more in me than I saw in myself.

After helping to start NYC Outward Bound, Greg went to work for Outward Bound USA in a new role that had him traveling around the country attempting to create other Outward Bound centers like the one that he had helped to bring to NYC and to steer Outward Bound back to its educational roots by following the model that had been established in NYC and bringing its pedagogy and activities into schools. That work led directly to the founding of Expeditionary Learning (now known as EL Education) in 1992 when Greg led a team from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound in crafting a winning proposal to the New American School Corporation, an entity started by President George H.W. Bush to create “break the mold” schools in the U.S.

The approval of the proposal led to Greg’s being named as the founding President of Expeditionary Learning, a role he served in until he retired in 2008. It was a role that represented the fulfillment of a vision he possessed since the early 1960’s when, as a young man who had served as a teacher and an admissions officer at Princeton, he went on an Outward Bound course in Colorado and came away from that experience asking why school couldn’t be more like an Outward Bound course, with a premium placed on adventure, discovery, teamwork, craftsmanship, and the completion of challenging tasks that require the exercise of problem-solving and critical thinking skills as well as individual and collective best effort. That vision of what schools can and should be is now being brought to life in hundreds of schools across the country that incorporate the EL Education model, including those that are part of the NYC Outward Bound Schools network.

But for all his professional accomplishments, what best defines Greg Farrell and stands above all else is the quality of his character. He was, quite simply, an extraordinary human being, the rare individual who was equal parts wise, kind, funny, curious, empathic, gentle, and generous. Greg didn’t just preach the values of Outward Bound, he lived them. And he also was the embodiment of the spirit of Outward Bound.

He didn’t just go through life, he experienced it fully and zestfully, with a hunger to continue to learn, to grow, and to try new things. He didn’t just interact with people, he embraced them fully, recognizing their strengths while accepting their foibles and always making them feel wanted and loved.  And in every interaction with Greg, what came shining through was his compassionate nature. When you were with Greg, you always knew that you were with someone who cared about you and would, without reservation, lend you a helping hand if you needed it. That compassion was never more evident than in the remarkable care he gave to his wife Cathy who had a 15 year struggle with Alzheimer’s disease and who Greg lovingly and tenderly looked after as her primary caretaker until her death last year.

Greg was one of the few people I know who actually met Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound. He had dinner with Hahn sometime in the early 1970’s when Hahn was visiting New York City. I remember Greg describing him to me as “courtly,” someone who talked little about himself but was intensely interested in whomever he was with, asking probing questions of them through which he forged an intimate connection. Whether he realized it or not, in describing Hahn, Greg was describing himself. He too was a master of listening and of the gently probing question; someone who was genuinely interested in other people and who was genuinely convinced that there was dignity and worth, greatness even, in each person whom he encountered. The columnist David Brooks might well have been talking about Greg when he wrote this about the novelist E.M. Forster: “To speak to him was to be seduced by an inverse charisma, a sense of being listened to with such intensity that you had to be your most honest, sharpest, and best self.” Perhaps Greg’s greatest gift is that he helped so many of us tap into our best selves.

Greg Farrell was one of the best people I’ve ever known. In truth, I’d be hard pressed to name someone who I consider to be his match. As I write this, I am finding it impossible to contemplate a world without him. But I take solace in knowing that the world is so much better because of him and that each of us who had the privilege of spending time with him has been immeasurably enriched and will do our best going forward to honor his legacy.