

Why Health Promotion Leader Bill Baun Wants Us to “Look Through a Different Lens”

...by Paul Terry

Leadership in health promotion

According to Teddy Roosevelt, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” It’s a quote that came to mind after I called Bill Baun, Wellness Officer at MD Anderson Cancer Center and immediate Past President of the National Wellness Institute (NWI), to ask his thoughts on wellness and equity. Roosevelt’s sentiments felt apt because Bill’s first instincts were not to exhort us to increase our knowledge about gender-sensitive programs or to design interventions more likely to improve health literacy. To be sure,

mentioning where Bill’s mind *didn’t* wander. He didn’t mention that he received NWI’s Lifetime Achievement Award as a pioneer in the field of workplace wellness. Nor did he mention getting wellness articles published in the vaunted *Harvard Business Review* or *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics*. Bill also did not



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we eventually discussed the need for them, but first Bill reflected on how he personally felt a need to “step inside more.” What have I done, he thought, to “help build deeper solutions.” He mused about how “effective process evaluation means understanding the wellness experience from everyone’s perspective,” and not just thinking up “white-collar solutions.” Ultimately, Bill demonstrated how much he cares by telling me what he thinks was his most important contribution to NWI.

Before I share what made Bill most proud during his leadership tenure at NWI, let me put it in context by



describe how he led wellness programs for the first corporation ever to earn the *Health Project’s* C. Everett Koop Award for excellence in worksite health promotion. He did say that he was glad to have partnered with others to build out NWI’s Certified Wellness

Practitioner designation, but that also was second to his preferred legacy. To see what Bill Baun cares most about, visit the NWI Board of Directors page and take a look at the leaders who replaced what Bill acknowledged had been a male-dominated institution for too many years. Equity isn’t about head

counts per se, but by my estimate, a female-dominated profession benefits from having a clear majority of women in leadership roles.

Some may find it ironic, even hypocritical, for me to have called a fellow older white male to gather thoughts on gender inequality. It's an understandable reaction. Nevertheless, having worked on and off over several years on HIV prevention in Africa, I've come to have an overriding reaction to the idea of women's empowerment: It's a half-baked notion that may do more harm than good. I explain this further in: *Breaking Stone Silence: Giving Voice to AIDS Prevention in Africa* (Africa World Press).

Speaking With Authenticity

British actress Emma Watson has gone viral on YouTube recently, and not because she's revisiting her role in *Harry Potter*. She spoke, instead, from her vantage point as the UN Women's Global Goodwill Ambassador, to introduce the HeforShe initiative aimed at galvanizing boys and men to support equal rights and gender equality (visit www.heforshe.org). Emma describes in eloquent and personal ways how the word feminism has been so misused as to have women of her generation reject it. Too often, she says, feminism comes across as hating men when, more essentially, the gender equality movement must become a freedom movement in which everyone has a voice.

Bill speaks of how wellness professionals who care about equality must take advocacy stances in policies related to transportation, pay equity, and food policy. Freedom matters when it comes to enabling health for all. Though things like walking paths are a start, he worries they can

miss the point entirely when: "Poor single moms don't have the same daily choices I have," adding, "They look at life through a different lens, and so should I." Similarly, Emma notes that only until men and women alike feel free to set aside prejudices can we hope to advance the kinds of policies Bill sees as the deeper solutions needed to address health disparities and wellness inequities.

Writing With Humility About Living

I called Bill on this topic partly because his brand of liberation is attached to an abiding appreciation for both life and death. In addition to his wellness expertise, Bill is a prostate cancer survivor, hospice advocate, and untiring spokesperson for living well with a serious illness. Read nearly any of the hundreds of blog posts Bill has written (<http://williambaun.blogspot.com>) since his diagnosis and you feel the acute joy he takes from daily living. He finds a humbled sort of splendor in common things like a bird's reflection across a pond or his daughter discovering a "really cool seashell." Bill is ever mindful of "grateful moments never lost" and the "eternity of connections to places we've been and people we love." Knowing Bill and reading his tomes, I believe he considers his life quite similar to how Emma describes hers: that of "sheer privilege."

I also feel regularly attuned to the duties that accompany white privilege, but have sometimes felt the vagaries as well. You must weigh in as an advocate for those less lucky but you speak for them at your peril. I sensed no such worry on Bill's part. In fact, there was a strikingly common theme I noticed when interviewing him after having listened to Emma's speech on feminism. With emphasis on freedom,

she admonishes those who would make feminism a cause only for women: "Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive... it's about freedom... and that also means freedom to feel vulnerable."

Bill readily relates to, indeed even embraces, feeling vulnerable. When I asked for his opinion about research studies we've published at StayWell showing how women report higher levels of lost productivity than men, he again spoke of using "a different lens." We treat a "caring personality as if it's a defect." He explained it may simply be that women, who tend to be the caregivers on the job as well as at home and for society, have every right to feel an inordinate strain on their productivity. "Maybe it's all the meds I'm on," Bill says coyly, "but I've found it quite easy to be in touch with my sensitive side."

Emma closes her extraordinary speech by saying she's asked herself "Why this Potter girl would be qualified" to discuss global inequities. The response: "All I know is that I care about this

problem." And that's precisely where Bill started when I asked for his expert opinion on wellness inequity. We will all do well by starting there and by emulating Bill's authentic, and inspiring, leadership.

Clearly, both these individuals are leaders who consider what they do as a sincere expression of who they are. 🇺🇸

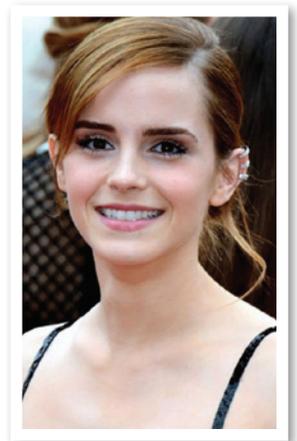


Photo by Georges Biard