

BROMMEL-NIEMANN DETERMINATION AGAINST ALL ODDS SCHOLARSHIP

Debra Niemann fascinated me as a professor from her first speech in one of my classes. Where other freshmen classmates timidly expressed their ideas, she paraded hers. She really did not care if I liked her topic or content. She cared only to speak her truth about the subject. I admire courage/guts in any human being. I want all my students to have their own ideas and just logically support them. It is not important that we agree; it is only important in how civilly we disagree. It's a democracy and speech must be free!

Thus began our long rich friendship from Speech #1 to this day. We have always remained in contact by phone, emails or visits. Debra can talk eloquently on so many subjects. Her multi-faceted mind intrigues me. Her wit and humor prevail in her outgoing personality. When Northeastern planned to honor me by naming a building, I could chose ONLY one student to speak on my behalf. I pondered for weeks; thinking of the thousands of fine student speakers I had in my classes. Memories of Debra kept coming back. I realized that in many ways her struggles paralleled that of so many other NEIU students. When I heard her talk on dedication day, I knew I had made the right choice. I will let you all judge by including Debra's speech at that important event in my life. For me, she typifies the many NEIU wonderful students that made my professor's life meaningful.

Speech for the Dedication of the Dr. Bernard Brommel Building Northeastern IL University – Nov. 2010

We're here today to honor Dr. Brommel, to celebrate his enormous contributions both to Northeastern and to each of us individually. My story is just one of many Dr. Brommel can claim credit for.

My name is Debra Niemann. Born and raised in Chicago, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I knew I wanted, as the poet said, to "breathe a larger air." I was admitted to Northeastern "by the skin of my teeth" in 1971 and graduated with honors in 1976.

Since then, I have enjoyed a very successful career in advertising and my career took me to Paris, China and other places I only dreamed of as a child. I currently work in economic development in San Francisco. In part, I am here today to testify to the power of one professor to change lives and fulfill dreams - when that professor is someone like Dr. Brommel. Dr. Brommel's greatest quality, I think, is captured in an age-old custom of the African Bushmen. When one notices a fellow tribe member coming out of the bush, he exclaims, "I see you!" and the one approaching responds, "I am here."

Dr. Brommel truly *saw* me as a person. The power of this act of bearing witness is both simple and profound. **It is essential to have someone affirm in some fashion, "I see you." Only then can we claim our own lives, assert our own presence, and use our unique talents to respond, "I am here."**

I would not have graduated from college, let alone be standing in front of you today, if not for Dr. Brommel's extraordinary capacity to *see* me. **Dr. Brommel saw me in my time of struggle. He saw me in my time of sorrow and he saw me in my time of success.**

Like many of you, I first met Dr. Brommel in a Speech 101 class. For my first speech I chose what was then a hot-button topic: legalizing abortion; and I steeled myself for his negative reaction as a middle-aged male. But instead of chastising me, Dr. Brommel spent time respectfully discussing the women's movement while critiquing the technical aspects of my speech. Even then, Dr. Brommel was a man who saw women as human beings with the right to self-determination.

Dr. Brommel created a safe space, without judgment, condemnation or ridicule, which allowed me as a sad, rebellious 19-year-old girl to see that not every middle-aged guy was my father. Dr. Brommel let me struggle and develop my own beliefs. And in doing so he affirmed over and over, "I see you."

Dr. Brommel didn't care what you looked like, where you went to high school or the grades you got back then. He cared about what work you were willing and able to do right now. And how much dogged determination you had inside. Even after I graduated from Northeastern, Dr. Brommel was there for me in good times and bad.

In 1976, my mother ended her own life. As I escorted my mother's casket down the aisle, I looked up and saw Dr. Brommel standing at the back of the church. In the agonizing days that followed, Dr. Brommel helped me through that tragedy by seeing, supporting, and affirming me as a survivor.

Dr. Brommel also witnessed my success. In 1978 I moved to New York City to start a career in advertising and live *my* American Dream. Ted Bates Advertising, the world's largest ad agency, had offered me a spot in their management training program as one of the first three females.

Dr. Brommel saw what a coup that was for me, a girl whose family did not believe women amounted to much. He visited me in New York and as we walked through Times Square he hooked his arm in mine and told me over and over how pleased he was with my success, and how happy and proud he was of my accomplishments.

My family never visited me in New York, and had no idea what I did for work or how the odds were stacked against my having a seat at the table. But Dr. Brommel did. Once again, he said sincerely, "I see you." And in that, he made it possible for me to breathe that larger air.

We are here to dedicate a building to Dr. Brommel, but he would be the first to say that what matters is not the name on the building but the spirit inside it. I hope his spirit of *seeing* seeps into every nook and cranny of this building, so that every student who crosses this threshold in the future can have the same opportunity that profoundly changed my life: To be truly seen by a teacher here, and through that, to believe in who they are and what they can become.

Thank you for the opportunity to honor Dr. Brommel.