

What most impressed me about Norm Krumholz

My first meeting with Norm Krumholz was in 1975 in his Cleveland City Hall office when I was looking for my first job as a city planner.

As I walked through what seemed like a labyrinth of hallways to reach Norm's unassuming office, I remember thinking that this was a rather inauspicious home for a nationally renowned leader of equity planning! I later realized that anything grander would have been incompatible with Norm's focus on improving the quality of life for those whose homes were decidedly less grand than Norm's City Hall office!

Norm was very gracious in our meeting but made it clear that there was no job for me at Cleveland City Planning, as most of the City's departments were focused on trying to avoid layoffs rather than adding staff members. Fortunately, I was young enough not to let this news make me question my career choice!

It took me ten more years, after a fruitful but not completely fulfilling digression into suburban planning, to find my way back to the "big city" Cleveland City Planning office, when I was hired to lead Cleveland's Civic Vision 2000 Citywide Plan. By this time, Norm had joined the world of academia at Cleveland State University, but fortunately for me, I re-connected with him every year, as he adopted me as a member of his large family of guest speakers.

One of my greatest honors as a city planner came when I retired from my job as Cleveland City Planning Director, and Norm asked me to co-teach his city planning class at CSU, which I did for Norm's last two years as a CSU professor.

Looking back on my time with Norm, there are three aspects of Norm's career that stand out most for me.

First, not surprisingly, is Norm's unwavering lifetime commitment to "promoting a wider range of choices for those individuals and groups who have few, if any, choices" (in the words of his 1975 Cleveland Policy Plan). While some of us came out of planning school with a similarly noble outlook, many of us allowed that commitment to be compromised and suppressed as we shifted our focus to the

daily demands of the job. Somehow Norm was able to “keep his eyes on the prize” throughout his long career.

Second, in what most impressed me about Norm, was his ability to work within the establishment – specifically, the bureaucratic and political world of city government – to accomplish many of his decidedly anti-establishment goals and policies. Other “rebels” would have quickly fled city government to become a critic or commentator, while Norm continued to fight the good fight from the inside (a double agent?), even as the context of his work changed from the supportive environment of Mayor Stokes to the somewhat disinterested administration of Mayor Perk to the brief and chaotic era of Mayor Kucinich.

Third, and finally, what most impressed me about Norm, was his openness to presenting other points of view to his students. In our professional relationship, Norm knew that I shared much of his interest in promoting greater equity, but he also knew I was in many ways a traditional city planner -- utilizing land use planning, zoning and design review as tools of my trade. Norm had very little use for what he considered these niceties of the city planning profession, but he showed full respect to me and my views as I spoke to his city planning students.

What struck me about our interactions in Norm’s classrooms was his sincere interest in understanding and considering perspectives that were different than his own deeply held views. Despite our ideological differences, I never felt that Norm was “setting me up” as the straw man in our classroom debates. I felt that he respected me and my perspectives, even when we differed.

Today in our increasingly polarized society and our “echo chamber” news feeds, I can’t think of a more valuable lesson than what Norm had to teach us through the example he set of maintaining the passion for his core beliefs while respecting the beliefs held by others.

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