James Motzko

Fresh off the farm in ’59, Carleton for me was not just an education but a transformative experience. At the freshman convo, Larry Gould, wearing the red tie, exhorted us to the pursuit of excellence and predicted that “Carleton will always be with you.” My freshman grades didn’t live up to his standard, but the prophesy came true.

Although offering no athletic scholarships, the college had “recruited” me to fill the very large shoes of all-conference BB center, Ivan Grimm. Every athlete at Carleton confronts the tension between time demanded by the sport and lofty academic standards. I remember bouncing around in the back of a station wagon on the long, long road to Knox and Monmouth trying to make sense of Tristam Shandy, but unable to block out the sound of Jack Thurnblad (bless his heart) relating yet another Ring Lardner Alibi Ike story. Then returning to campus three days later, and peeking into the Musser study room at 1:00 am seeing it packed with guys wielding slide rules, thinking I can’t compete with this and giving serious thought to quitting the team. But I didn’t quit, and to this day, my attitude is: having gone to all that trouble getting into shape, why lose it? So I became a runner and spent 30 years doing that (these days in my walker) and 20 years as a biker, my current obsession.

I began as a history major but couldn’t resist the magnetism of the English Department. Elledge, Jenkins, Whittemore, Carver, Harriet Sheridan, Shain, and Soule were the NY Yankees of language arts. Of course, someone had to ask, “What are you going to do when you graduate?” Like many Carls, I answered, “um... go to grad school?” Carleton had taught me to love taking classes, so I did an MA at Boston U, then spent a year on American Literature at Wisconsin, many night classes at the University of Minnesota, later summer institutes at Kenyon and Kansas, on and on—for a time “professional student” a favorite occupation. But, because JFK made the “Ask not” speech in 1961, some joined the Peace Corps; I wasn’t that brave, but public service, rather than making money, became the goal for a lot of us from that era. In my case, it meant teaching literature and writing at Hopkins High School outside Chandler-Gilbert Community College in Phoenix.

I spend my summers in Minneapolis to be near family. Married for a long time, now single, I have a daughter in Edina and three grandchildren there; my son lives in California and is married to a China native he met in Shanghai while teaching ESL. They have two daughters.

My greatest accomplishment at Carleton? The Matteson senior MVP award was nice, but I’m a lot prouder of that A- from Jenkins for my Aristotle’s Poetics essay and, come to think of it, waiting on tables for four years in Burton Dining Hall, without dropping a tray, or spilling one drop of Clarence Skaar’s boeuf au jus on my starched white livery.

“You can take the boy off the farm, etc.” But at Carleton I saw Lysistrata, Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain, Peter Basquin at the piano, William H. Whyte, Senators Eugene McCarthy and HHH, Henry Steele Commager, Peter, Paul and Mary, Brahms’ Requiem, John K. Galbraith, Alfred Kazin, Steven Spender, Girl Crazy, Waiting for Lefty, Karl Shapiro, Marian Anderson, John Dos Passos, the Oberlin and St Olaf choirs... and so much more. I was blown away!