



Larry Harris: A Tribute to My Friend, Lew

This tribute was delivered at the memorial service for Dr. H. Lewis Batts, Jr., one of the founding partners of the Parkview Hills development, who died on October 9, 2000.

I am honored to be able to share with you some of my experiences with the man whose life we celebrate today, Dr. H. Lewis Batts, Jr.

I can best encapsulate the essence of what Dr. Batts meant to me, how he dealt with problems, and perhaps give you a little insight into our relationship by relating a story, which took place before I even joined the Parkview Hills team.

It was mid year 1970, the local paper was filled with stories regarding the new environmentally sensitive community to be built on the southwest side of Kalamazoo by a development partnership comprised of Dr. Lewis Batts and Burton Upjohn. At the time, I was employed with the City of Kalamazoo as their Landscape Architect.

I already knew Burt Upjohn, having met him in 1963, and was moonlighting for him at night providing planning and landscape services for his home and some of his business ventures around the Midwest.

One day Burt called me at the Parks Department and said, "I hope you're ready to go into business for yourself, because I have a large project for you; all you'll need to do is convince my partner."

Now I'm not sure how well many of you knew these two gentlemen, each was a mover and shaker in his own right, but they had to be the original Odd Couple, for they viewed development from opposite ends of the spectrum. Burt, the eternal optimist could convince anyone to do anything and knew conventional development. On the other end, Lew was not a developer; he just knew what a development should be. He was a professor of ecology at Kalamazoo College, Director

of The Kalamazoo Nature Center, and the environmental conscience of Kalamazoo and many other cities throughout the country. At the time he appeared to me to be quiet, stoic and resolute in his ideals. Where insensitive environmental development was concerned, he often took individuals, companies and cities to task for doing the wrong things. From my vantage point, convincing Dr. Batts that I was the right person for the job seemed comparable to David facing Goliath—I was scared to death.

Well, the fateful day of the interview arrived, and I met Dr. Batts at the entry to Parkview Hills. We walked the route of the new boulevard, which was partially installed, to where the circle started. As we walked, he laid out his vision of what he thought the community should be: a community sensitive to its surroundings that preserved the marshland as much of the vegetation as possible; a development responsive to the ter-

rain and that had buried utilities. The points of his vision were endless.

On our walk he questioned me on how I might approach these and other issues, and things seemed to be going very well; I was warming to the task. We reached the end of the boulevard and were walking back when he asked the fatal question. "Are you an outdoors person," he asked.

"Of course, I love the outdoors, especially the woods," I answered smugly.

"You're not a hunter are you?" He said it like a statement not a question, but it hit me like a ton of bricks.

Now if you know me, you must know I love to deer hunt. Why in the world did he ask that question? I, who on November 14, kisses my wife goodbye, hugs the kids and disappears for a week... Do I hunt? No, I obsess over it. I was dead! I saw the job flying right out the window. I had to be truthful.

“Yes, I love to deer hunt,” I answered.

I looked his way and he wasn’t smiling. We walked in silence for what seemed like an eternity then he said in his quiet manner, “Well, hunting can be an acceptable means of control, if it is done for the right reasons.”

Right then and there I learned something about this man; he was thoughtful, he spoke softly but with meaning, and he always listened to alternative ideas even though he might not agree. And if he didn’t agree he’d tell you so.

I worked with Lew on various projects for over 30 years and he taught me a lot. During the Parkview Hills development, which took the better part of 20 years, Lew had the final say in development decisions between the partners. Once a week he would stop in my office to discuss issues in general terms. He would ask: my point of view on how current construction was progressing, what development challenges were and the horizon and what my approach would be to those problems to maintain environmental sensitivity.

We would talk about the ecological principals that might apply to the challenges ahead, but he never told me directly how to meet those challenges. He left me room to wrestle with the problems and to suggest solutions.

I learned a great deal about the

interdependence of plant and animal communities, and for me, ecology took on a new meaning. What started out as a shallow and superficial understanding of the natural world took on importance to me as we faced each new hurdle at Parkview Hills.

When I referred to Lew and Burt as the original Odd Couple, I meant it. To Lew, Parkview as a laboratory, and it was most important to prove to the development world that there was a better way to develop, and that quality of life issues were important. Burt, on the other hand, wished to create a great development and not to lose his or Lew’s shirt in the process. Burt was constantly calling me to help him persuade Lew on particular development point; I was squarely in the middle between two immovable objects.

To illustrate how comical these tug of wars could get, I remember when Burt was building his condominium in the Shores. Both partners loved trees and fought to save them, except when Burt discovered a cherry tree right in the way between his view of the water and his dining room window. He wanted me to have it removed because it was diseased. I didn’t agree. It was perfectly healthy.

When I went on vacation, the grounds crew removed the tree. While walking around, Lew discovered that the tree had been removed. The day after my return, Lew brought the matter

up to Burt. With a look of utter surprised, and without hesitation, Burt replied that the tree must have been diseased. Lew promptly left his office and headed for my office at Landmark House.

While he was *en route*, Burt called me to plead his case and “to help your old buddy out,” as he put it. When Lew arrived, he asked me if I had given the order to remove a diseased tree at the Shores in front of Burt’s condominium. I of course replied, “What tree was that? There are no diseased trees.”

Lew turned right around saying, “That’s what I thought,” and headed back to Burt’s office. A half-hour later Burt called somewhat sheepishly and asked me to find a replacement tree, hopefully a shorter tree—and to thank me for all my lack of support.

Lew Batts was my mentor and a good friend; he cast a long shadow of influence over Kalamazoo, and he helped a lot of people in so many ways it would be hard for me to list them all. I will never forget him; he will remain in my heart as long as I live and I look forward to the day when I will see him again.

