

Al Haber
April 1, 1930-February 12, 2005
Years as Faculty Master: 1985-1990

Alan Howard Haber was born in Chicago in 1930. He was an only child. Since a very early age his parents recognized that he was exceptionally intelligent and pushed him to get a good education and make a better life for himself. When the time came to go away to college, Al jumped at the chance and left home to pursue his passions.

He did his undergraduate work at the California Institute of Technology. While at Caltech he was surrounded by many brilliant scientists and was inspired to pursue a career path as a scientist. Although he studied physics at Caltech he was deeply interested in biology and for the rest of his life his work and experiments as a scientist would cross the boundaries of both the world of biology and of physics. He was awarded his bachelor's degree in Physics in 1953. Following his undergraduate education he pursued graduate work at the University of Wisconsin at Madison where he was awarded his PhD in Plant Physiology in 1956. Here he was mentored by Professor Folke Skoog, with whom he had a very close relationship. It was also at this time that he would meet his future wife, Joyce. They were married in 1956. Together he and Joyce would have four children, Lisa, David, Jean and Julie. The Habers were a very close family and Al and Joyce loved their children tremendously.¹

Following his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, Al, encouraged by his mentor Dr. Skoog, moved with his family to Oak Ridge, Tennessee where he was employed by the US Government at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Oak Ridge was where the theory behind the atomic bomb was developed and ever since had been a lab for cutting-edge research involving radiation. While at Oak Ridge, Al was in charge of scientific experimentation with a focus on the effects of radiation on plants. He quickly became a manager of a team of scientists

pursuing this research. While at Oak Ridge he did teach at the University of Tennessee. This gave him some of his first teaching experiences and he soon came to realize that he enjoyed teaching more than he did scientific experimentation. Years later his son David would joke that the only reason that his father taught at the University of Tennessee was because the lab was right next to the football stadium. Football was a sport that his father enjoyed tremendously. One of the greatest words of wisdom that Al Haber passed down to his son when he was very young was to never bet against Notre Dame or Alabama. Many years later as an adult, David Haber was living in Tucson, Arizona. In desperate need of money, David placed a very large bet with some shady bookies. However, David remembered his father's advice and put his money on Notre Dame and Alabama. Sure enough, both teams won their games.²

Al would work at Oak Ridge for seventeen years in what many would consider a great and prestigious career, and working on some of the most cutting-edge areas of modern science. However, Al, ever the family man, was concerned about the education of his children, who were nearing high school age. Al and Joyce began researching places that had good high schools for their children and other options for their own employment. Besides the education of his children, Al learned through his teaching experiences at the University of Tennessee that he loved teaching and the interaction with students. It was during this time that he discovered a relatively small state university in upstate New York called SUNY Binghamton. Al inquired to see what job possibilities were available with SUNY Binghamton and shortly thereafter not only was he offered a job but also the chair of the entire Biology Department. In 1973 the Habers moved to Binghamton and Al began teaching Biology at the university.³

Al Haber soon learned that he loved teaching and interacting with students far more than he liked running experiments and doing research. He also came to realize that many students

came to him for advice on a whole variety of topics not including simple classroom topics related to the subject that he taught. Al liked giving advice when it was asked of him and really wanted to find a way to become more involved in the lives of students. He was encouraged by Augie Mueller, a fellow Biology Professor and the Master of Newing College, to look into a position as Faculty Master. When Nick Sterling left the position, of Master of Hinman in 1985, Al Haber jumped at the chance to take the position seeing it as a way to become more involved with students. During the time leading up to assuming the Mastership of Hinman, he told his wife that he would dream of being a Master at Cambridge University. His wife remembers him just loving the concept of being a Master and of being so intimately connected to students in a small institution. In many ways it seemed as though his whole life's ambition was to have this job.⁴

Al was passionate about his work and considered it a great honor to be selected as Faculty Master. His son, David Haber, remembers that though his father never went into great detail on what he did as Master of Hinman, he always remembers how proud his father was of the position that he held and how much joy it brought to him. While the position brought Al Haber a great deal of joy, his presence as Master brought even greater amounts of joy to the people who surrounded him.

It is all too appropriate that Al Haber was born on April Fool's Day. Everyone who knew him attests that one of his greatest characteristics was his sense of humor. Rene Coderre, who was the Coordinator of Hinman College at the same time that Al Haber was Faculty Master, remembers Haber and his clever use of puns. Rene remembers the first day that Al moved into the Hinman Faculty Master's office he came in with a broken off handle of a tea cup and began tapping everything in the office. All of the office staff including Rene stared at Haber for a long

while in wonder of what he was doing. After a moment Haber looked up and with a smirk and said, “Don’t mind me, I’m just trying to get a *handle* on the office.”⁵

Al Haber was undoubtedly the master of puns. Adam Brown, who was a student and a grad RD during Al Haber’s tenure as Faculty Master, remembers the close relationship that he and Al had. Adam remembers a time when Al took him and another Hinmanite, Jarrod Bagatell, out for Chinese food. The three of them were waiting in line at a Chinese restaurant and having a normal conversation like anyone else when suddenly Al blurted out the question, “Why did the Chinese lose the war?” Both Adam and Jarrod were confused and replied that they did not know why. Al replied with the response, “General Tso’s chicken.” After the punch line finally dawned on them both Adam and Jarrod began to laugh at the absurdity of the joke. Adam also remembers that Al had a reputation for speeding. As a result of all the speeding tickets that he got, his wife Joyce made him tape a piece of paper with the words “Go 55” to his steering wheel, to remind him to slow down.⁶

Although he had a great sense of humor, Al was also not afraid to stand up for what he believed in. In the October 23, 1986 issue of the *Hinman Halitosis*, an editorial published by a writer with the pen name Scooter Junior had this to say about the quality of professors on campus.

Good Evening [sic]. I have decided to write again to prove that I am not dead. And you thought the Mets were down and out. Well, look silly Boston fans, go back to Beantown because the Mets are in control and coming back!

Now on to business. Did you ever get the impression that some of the professors and administrators think we are here for them and not the other way around? As of late, I seem to have this feeling that I am paying to go to school for the teachers’ sake and not for the sake of getting an education.

Last spring, the school released a professor who cared about the students because he didn’t publish on time. Meantime, we do have some professors who publish, but have little or no regard for the students. Not all our professors are like this. To those I do

sincerely apologize. We are fortunate to have some professional teachers here and I take my hat off the [sic] them. Is SUNY B. trying to build a reputation at the expense of the students?

If you have any opinion on this subject, even if it disagrees with mine, drop it off in the Halitosis envelope in your dorm. Please address it to: Scooter Jr.⁷

A few days later Al Haber responded with this letter published in the following week's *Hinman Halitosis*.

Dear Scooter Junior,
c/o Hinman Halitosis

You ask, "Did you ever get the impression that some of the professors and administrators think we are here for them and not the other way around?" This question, of course, was addressed to your fellow students. Even though I'm a professor, may I respond? (I can tell from the temperate tone of your writing that you're agreeable, so here goes...)

If your question requires only a true-false answer, I would say "true". If it is an essay-question, I would say—

Yes, some professors and some administrators often do seem more interested in matters other than your education. But I've noticed that some students also seem more interested in matters other than their own education (as distinct from grades). Let's consider some of the factors that keep professors, administrators, and students from doing their best to further your education—practical concerns for one's future (salary and security for faculty and administrators, grades for students), family or interpersonal problems, and lack of sufficient time and energy to do everything that's required for practical success and personal happiness. With these considerations, I hope you'll agree with me that the faculty and administrators are more or less just like you. We are all human. But you are different in one important way—you're more likely to be upset with compromise, especially when what's compromised is the education for which you and your family pay tuition and taxes. (I also feel I don't get my money's worth for my taxes.) When you are older (like me) you'll still see and, I hope, struggle with life's compromises. But you'll also see that the struggle is everywhere and inevitable. (If you don't believe me, ask your parents or older brothers and sisters out there in the "real world".)

The Mets (to whom you refer in your column) could not win without individual effort, teamwork, and understanding the Red Sox. Likewise, students won't be able to help themselves in their education without individual effort, teamwork (both with themselves and with faculty and administrators), and understanding the system.

You and I have something in common—during my last two years as an undergraduate (before you were born), I wrote a column on undergraduate life. Then also, student morale was assaulted by defective teaching, overemphasis on grades at the expense of learning, bad food (and I mean really bad) in the dining hall, and even climate (in this case, the climate of southern California which also, believe it or not, is far from perfect).

Everyone is coming from somewhere, so let me tell you where I'm now coming from. Like all faculty, administrators, and students, I've made compromises. Professors do three things here—teaching (your greatest concern), research and administration. In 1973 I was invited to come to SUNY-B because of my experience in research (in a non-university research institute) and administration. I accepted because I wanted to teach. Since I've been here, I've tried to juggle many things: teaching, research, administration, family and private life. This is not the place for an accounting of how well I've managed. Needless to say, I couldn't do it all—any more than I imagine you have been able to do all you hoped you could here. I'm not disappointed here with my over-all status, which was determined almost entirely by factors other than my teaching. Consider, however, the pressures on an untenured resident professor. At any university (and this is a university) his or her advancement, salary, and job security depend more upon research than any other factor. And on academic administrator's advancement, salary, and job security depend more upon things running smoothly than upon anything else. (I'm just “telling it like it is”.)

We all know there is more knowledge (not to mention life) than what you get in the classroom. Your professor's research doesn't always make him (or her) a worse teacher, it often makes him (or her) better—more knowledgeable and more interested, and therefore more interesting. As a student, I was directed to what was, for me, a good graduate program by my undergraduate professors' research knowledge and connections.

I'm sure the many professors who try to give you the best education they can would appreciate your taking your “hat off to them.” I am impressed with my many colleagues who give so much to the quality of your education—even though (as you suggest) some have done so at their own peril. Without in any way disagreeing with what you wrote, I have the impression that things are considerably better here than in most universities.

Now let's get down to business, Mr./Ms. Scooter Jr! What can I do to help you understand the system? Please come talk to me. (I won't divulge your identity without your permission. I would come to you, but I don't know who you are.) If we can get a few of your friends together for dinner in the Hinman dining hall some evening, I'll guarantee to bring (a) a professor who agrees with you, (b) another professor who believes at this time in its development SUNY-B should emphasize research and graduate education even at the possible expense of undergraduate teaching, and (c) an administrator with yet another point of view. We can then have an informal discussion in your residence hall lounge. I'll bet the students would find it very interesting. I know I would.

As Woody Allen said (in “Take the Money and Run” as he was released from jail)...”Keep in touch.”⁸

As evidence by this letter, Al Haber was not trying to put down this concerned student. Far from it, he was offering to go out of his way to help educate not only the author of the original letter but also the many students of Hinman College and of the whole SUNY Binghamton campus who undoubtedly had similar views on the quality of the undergraduate education. Whether this meeting between Scooter Junior and Al Haber took place is unknown, however, this is a perfect example of Al Haber standing up for what he believed in and also for his philosophy of always trying to turn a situation into a positive learning experience for students. It has also been speculated that Scooter Junior was in fact Al Haber and that he planted the letter in the *Halitosis* under the pen name Scooter Junior so he could write the response and get his view across. The final line of the letter is also vintage Al Haber. Al loved all comedy and especially Woody Allen. He even kept a small picture of Woody Allen in his office.⁹

Like every other Hinman Faculty Master that came before and after him, Al Haber left a positive and lasting impact on each of the students that he mentored. Adam Brown lived in Hinman College for a record seven years, first as an undergraduate student in Roosevelt and an RA in Smith Hall, then as the RD of Roosevelt from 1986 until 1989. Adam remembers the relationship that he had with Al Haber, his mentor, confidant and friend during his years in Hinman. Traditionally, each of the residential colleges has an RA Day Away where all the RA's and the professional staff of a residential college go away for a day during summer training to perform team building exercises, to play games outside, and to simply have fun and get to know one another. It was during one of these RA Days Away that the entire Hinman staff had a day away near a very picturesque lake on a beautiful sunny day. During this Day Away, a pickup game of softball occurred and Al Haber brought his old leather baseball glove. His glove was in

an old fashioned 1940's style with just the leather fingers and no real mitt. Later, when Adam was in graduate school at Binghamton, he was cast in a play where he needed a baseball glove to fit that era. Al Haber lent him his glove for the play. After the play was over Al told Adam to hold on to the glove for the time being. On a number of occasions, Adam tried to return the glove to Al, but Al kept telling Adam to hold on to the glove. Finally, before Adam was to graduate with his Master's Degree in 1989 and leave Binghamton and Hinman for good he went back to Al Haber one last time to try and return the glove. Al took the glove in his hands and looked it over, handed it back to Adam and said to him that the glove was very special, but that he wanted Adam to have it. Adam still has that glove to this very day.¹⁰

Jarrold Bagatell also fondly remembers Al Haber as his friend and mentor while he was in Hinman. When Jarrold first met Al he just could not believe what a wonderful human being he was.

There was this person who was this brilliant scientist but yet he was so down to earth. The first time I met him was in August of 1985 when he, Rene Coderre and a bunch of us were at a meeting in one of the main lounges. Al just made everyone feel at ease. He knew what it was like for the freshmen and how difficult the transition from high school to college could be. I'll always remember the first day when freshmen moved in he would come around to every floor and let everyone know that "Uncle Al" was always there to talk if they needed anything.¹¹

During another one of the RA Days Away both Jarrold and Al rowed out into the middle of a lake in a boat. On a whim, Jarrold decided to moon all of the other people on the shore. Al fell into a fit of hysterical laughter which ended with him saying, "I would've done it too if I weren't Master." When Jarrold applied to medical school Al wrote his letter of recommendation to Upstate Medical School. Today Jarrold is a doctor practicing family medicine in Syracuse, NY.¹² These are just two of many Hinmanites whose lives were touched and made better because of Al Haber.

Unfortunately Al's time in Hinman would be all too brief. He left the Mastership of Hinman in 1990 because he became very ill. For years many doctors tried to find out exactly what was making him ill. Finally, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. Throughout his life Al had led a very healthy lifestyle. He did not smoke and did not drink alcohol. It has been speculated that it is possible that he contracted the cancer from his time spent studying the effects of radiation on plants while he was at Oak Ridge. However, there is no way of knowing exactly how he contracted the cancer. Even though the prognosis was not good, Al kept his spirits up and, believing in the philosophy that laughter is the best medicine, continued to have a sense of humor about it. During some of the most painful and agonizing days of his treatment, Al would rent some of his favorite Woody Allen movies to get his mind off the unpleasantness of his disease. In many ways Al laughed himself well. He had a bone marrow transplant which worked and he lived for another fifteen years. Throughout it all he continued to teach when he could, even from a wheelchair, which was very difficult for him because he was so athletic for most of his life. He survived the cancer but would die of a sudden heart attack in 2005.¹³

Even in death Al would still have a presence. At Al's memorial service in the Fine Arts Building on the Binghamton University campus, Jarrod Bagatell would sit next to a colleague of Al's from his time at Oak Ridge. This particular man had flown from his home in North Carolina to Philadelphia where his flight was delayed. Wanting to make the memorial service on time, he rented a car and drove the rest of the way to Binghamton. During the service this man got up to help eulogize Al and said, "Al always promised if I said something at his memorial service that he'd say something at mine." Shortly after he finished speaking he sat back down next to Jarrod, fell backwards and stopped breathing. Dr. Jarrod Bagatell quickly jumped into action and ripped off the man's shirt and saw a surgical scar that suggested he had once had heart

bypass surgery. Joyce Haber, who knew the man, confirmed that he had a heart condition. Jarrod and a student who knew first aid then performed CPR for five minutes while they waited for Harpur's Ferry to arrive. When Harpur's Ferry arrived they brought out a defibrillator. Jarrod gave the man one shock with the defibrillator. Immediately the man's pulse returned, and though he was vomiting and shaking violently, he was ok. All you could hear after that was an automated recording in a very electronic computer generated voice on the defibrillator that said "low battery" over and over again in an almost comical way. The memorial service was held on a cold winter day and the intense cold had caused the battery to nearly run dead. The ambulance took the man away for further treatment at Wilson Memorial Hospital. Later on, after the memorial service, Jarrod learned from the doctors that treated the man that he should have died then and there. Jarrod to this day claims that this incident, which is nothing short of a miracle, was Al Haber speaking just as he had promised. The story is not over yet. When Jarrod returned to the memorial service, after cleaning up a bit, to give his eulogy of Al Haber, he soon realized that he had left his prepared speech on the gurney that was now en route to the hospital. He then proceeded to give a five minute extemporaneous speech. Though he was not prepared for this speech, it was from the heart, something that Al would have appreciated. To this day Jarrod believes that this was Al Haber's last good-hearted joke that he played on Jarrod and that his spirit and presence was there on that cold February day.¹⁴

In both life and death Al Haber made a difference and a lasting impression upon his students. From his time at Oak Ridge and the University of Tennessee to the Chairmanship of the SUNY Binghamton Biology Department to what he considered his proudest achievement and position, the Mastership of Hinman College, Al Haber made a huge impact on these positions and the people that he came in contact with.

His son David would say this about his father:

He was a guy who cared about his family. He was a simple guy. He cared about his students and the world...I didn't see my dad a lot after I moved out West but I talked to him all the time. He never really told me exactly what he did as Faculty Master but that's all he would ever talk about whenever I spoke to him. He was very proud to be Master of Hinman.¹⁵

Two years after the death of her husband, Joyce Haber had this to say about his legacy:

The love of his life was the kids. He dropped the entire research aspect of his life to be with the kids...He just loved rubbing shoulders with the kids and paying attention to them. He loved to play sports and he loved HPC. He was always available to the students if they needed him. It was fun, not work for him. He absolutely loved his job. It was the relationships with the students that he loved the most.¹⁶

Perhaps that is Al Haber's most treasured and lasting legacy. Though he was a brilliant scientist who pursued research on the cutting edge of modern science and made many contributions to his field, the most profound and important part of Al Haber's life was the advice and mentoring that he gave to his students and especially to the students of Hinman. His discoveries and scientific experiments may be lost in the pages of science journals and the backrooms of libraries, but the personal touch, sense of humor, and genuine warmth and affection is what will make "Uncle Al" immortal not only in the annals of Hinman College but in the hearts and minds of everyone whom he inspired to achieve greatness.

¹ Joyce Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 7, 2007 and David Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

² David Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007 and Joyce Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 10, 2007.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joyce Haber, interview with author, May 10, 2007.

⁵ Rene Coderre, interview with author, October 10, 2006.

⁶ Adam Brown, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2006.

⁷ Scooter Jr., "Scooter Junior's Corner," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. XVIII, No. 7, October 23, 1986.

⁸ Al Haber, letter to Scooter Junior, *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. XVIII, No. 9, November 6, 1986.

⁹ Jarrod Bagatell, telephone conversation with author, January 9, 2007.

¹⁰ Adam Brown, telephone conversation with author, November 21, 2006.

¹¹ Jarrod Bagatell, telephone conversation with author, January 9, 2007.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Joyce Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 10, 2007 and David Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

¹⁴ Jarrod Bagatell, telephone conversation with author, January 9, 2007.

¹⁵ David Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 9, 2007.

¹⁶ Joyce Haber, telephone conversation with author, May 7, 2007 and May 10, 2007.