

Sam Abell

Sam Abell spoke extemporaneously at the Celebration, and his comments were not captured. Below is the Remembrance he wrote for the slide presentation of Laird's life and work, much of which he included in his verbal comments that day.

Remembering Laird

When Laird Brown created his groundbreaking publication *The Student* in 1962 at Kent State University he was thinking about his immediate audience—his peers and fellow students. Or, perhaps, his future. He wasn't thinking about an aspiring high school photographer from the other side of Ohio. He couldn't possibly imagine that *The Student* would reach—and change—the life of such an unknown person.

But it did. I was the 17 year old who encountered *The Student* and took it deeply into my life. I still possess my bootlegged copy of *The Student* and always will. That's because I was Laird Brown's 'ideal reader.'

The Student was a new kind of publication. Done in collaboration with one of his professors, Laird created a substantial, stand alone, photo-rich book of one year of life at Kent State. It was the publication that every yearbook wanted to be and none were.

Gone was the mandatory content of yearbook—the synthetic portraits, staged group and team shots and random snapshots of campus social life. Replacing them were vibrant photo-essays in the tradition of LIFE magazine, all done by Laird.

The Student was an exemplary achievement, especially if you wanted to go forward in photography. Clearly, Laird was on that path. The next time I came across his name was in a photo credit under a remarkable double page image in *National Geographic*. He was on his way.

Meanwhile, in 1963 I took *The Student* with me to the University of Kentucky where four years later I edited and was photographer for the 1967 UK yearbook. It, too, was a radical publication: two hardbound volumes in a slip case. One volume contained the mandatory yearbook content. The other was 100% progressive photo essays, also done in the tradition of LIFE magazine. The blueprint for that yearbook was Laird Brown's *The Student*.

The UK yearbook earned me an internship at *National Geographic* where I wouldn't have been surprised to meet Laird. After all, I was once again following his trailblazing

footsteps. But by then he had moved on to a diversified and successful career in corporate photography.

Our paths crossed once. It was at the Santa Fe Workshops. Laird was taking a technical course that would directly enlarge his learning and benefit his business. I admired that. And I savored finally meeting the man who had shown me the way forward when it mattered most.

Thank you, Laird, for your vision, pioneering publication and never-ending learning. You, my friend, actually are *The Student*. And I am, and always will be, your ideal reader.

Sam Abell
Charlottesville, Virginia
January 4, 2022

Kathy's Later Addendum to Sam's Remembrance

Believe it or not, I had never seen Laird's copy of *The Student*—it was in a box in the garage, found only recently. I learned that Sam Abell had a copy (which he had treasured for decades, as it turns out) when I came across a 2005 clipping from the Kent State alumni newsletter. The article reported on the lecture Sam had given there, where he mentioned Laird's name as the creator of the volume he had determinedly "bootlegged" from the Kent State Photojournalism department while visiting at age 17, and then used for "the blueprint of his young life," and that he still had his copy. At the time, it was the only copy of *The Student* that I knew existed, so I tentatively wrote to Sam through his photography website, introduced myself and my mission (putting images from *The Student* in the slide presentation of Laird's life), and asked if he'd be willing to send me a scan or photo of a couple of his favorite pages. The very next day I learned that the Kent State archive had an extra copy of *The Student* that they would send me, and in the end, what Sam provided was the written Remembrance you see above, and in the full slide presentation of Laird's life and work. There's a much longer story here, but I was beyond thrilled when it turned out Sam would participate in the Celebration, itself. I can only imagine how immensely pleased Laird was to have Sam, who is truly a legend at National Geographic, speaking in such a heartfelt way about the influence of *The Student* on his life. This feels huge, in the big scheme of things. So planning for the Celebration accomplished much, on many levels. I'm sure the Universe is still celebrating its success in pulling strings to bring things together in this way.