Brown: special ed law is civil rights legislation

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"Regardless of a person’s ability or disability, what you find out as you become closer to them is how you are alike rather than how you are different," said Randel Brown, associate professor and director of Special Education at Texas A&M International University. "What fascinates me about working with people with disabilities, or anyone for that matter, is that we all have the same hopes and dreams. We want to be loved, We want to love. We want joy and happiness in our lives."

Brown, who also serves as interim chair of the department of professional programs, has worked at TAMU for the past 13 years. A native of Tulsa, Oklahoma, he attended the University of Central Oklahoma where he earned a BA and MA in Special Education. Brown received his Ph.D. also in special education, from Oklahoma State University. His interest in special education came from his own family experience. Brown and wife of 10 years, Guadalupe Garza Brown, share six children from previous marriages.

“I had three children that struggled with some learning disabilities early in their school life, so my interests in special education stemmed from that," he said, adding, "My children who struggled became successful as a result of the good teachers they encountered in their academic years." Brown has worked in one capacity or another as an educator for 30 years. He began working with adults with disabilities as a house parent in group homes and residential facilities in Oklahoma. He also worked as a school teacher prior to taking a compliance officer position with the State Department of Education in Oklahoma.

In that position, he visited schools to ensure they complied with special education law and helped them refine their procedures. “By and large I saw a lot of good teachers. We don’t ever do it exactly right, but what I saw most of the time were individuals who really in their heart wanted to do what’s right for students,” said Brown.

Over the years, Brown has developed a strong interest in special ed law. “In its purest form, it is civil rights legislation. It guarantees that people with disabilities will not be discriminated against simply because they have a difference in the way they learn,” Brown said.

"Disabilities are just simply things that fall in that normal range of what it means to be human. Rather than viewing disabilities as abnormal, they should be viewed as absolutely normal,” he added.

Brown’s research interests also pertain to the human rights issues of individuals with disabilities. He disclosed, “The things that make me feel really wealthy as a person are my friendships, the opportunity to practice my religion as I choose, and the opportunity to marry and have children. These are human rights that I think are sometimes denied to individuals with disabilities.”

For instance, he pointed out, some may assume that a person with a cognitive disability cannot maintain a romantic relationship or should not take communion at church because they don’t possess an understanding of what it means. Brown said the assumption that a person with a cognitive disability does not have the capacity to experience those kinds of moments is “short sighted.”

He continued, “Not allowing a person with a disability to have a rich and full life like everyone else is a human rights issue. Sometimes in an effort to protect somebody, we want to shield them from things; however, it is our job to really prepare them for life and work, to ensure they have rich experiences as adults. That’s what teachers do.”

Brown said he understands Laredo’s cultural connectedness and strong family support system. “Laredo has a great opportunity to really build meaningful lives for individuals with disabilities. It doesn’t always happen, but it happens more often than people think. People here have pretty rich lives,” Brown said, adding, “When they don’t, that’s when we as professionals in this field can actually help families and institutions build systems of support for individuals with disabilities.”

Brown has been involved with Special Olympics throughout his career and has served as a volunteer with Special Olympics Texas in Laredo since 1998. “We have a great Special Olympics regional office that makes an excellent effort for students with disabilities within our community,” he said.

He has instilled in his students the desire to become involved as well. “In the beginning of my classes, the students and I talk about the importance of the field they are pursuing and the importance of learning to give back,” said Brown, adding “I try to incorporate in my classes the opportunity for students to do that through the Special Olympics, which give them the opportunity to work with students with disabilities in a different capacity and engage in fun activities with them. It also serves to provide them with a bit of real world experience.”

Brown realizes students interested in pursuing the special education field that it’s a high need area. “While at TAMU, I’ve never known anyone who wanted to be a special education teacher here and didn’t get a job. It’s a difficult job, but it’s the most rewarding job as a teacher,” he said.

Brown added, “I love my job because I get to teach people how to help change lives. How many people really got to say that they do that — change the course of someone’s life?”

Brown has also served for over 20 years as a member of the Council for Exceptional Children, a national organization for professionals who work with individuals with disabilities, and the Association of Individuals with Developmental Disabilities.