

## **Robert Struthers**

George Brown College



I joined George Brown College in September 1969 as a professor in the College's launch of its two-year diploma program in hotel management, located at the former Provincial Institute of Trades in Toronto's Kensington Market.

Over my 31-year career at George Brown my roles included professor and chair in the School of Hospitality, dean of continuing education, vice-president access and external relations and vice-president corporate services. In 1969 colleges such as George Brown that were created from existing provincial institutes of trades were under considerable pressure from government to fulfill their new mandate by adding a wide variety of diploma programs to augment their well-established apprenticeship and certificate programs in skills training.

From the outset, new program viability became a major challenge in many sectors. In my program area four programs were launched at Toronto area colleges within the same three-year period. Not only were these colleges competing for students they were also competing to find faculty who had relevant industry experience and the appropriate academic credentials in their field. In Canada only Ryerson had a well-established program in hotel management yet there were only eighteen students in my graduating year. In 1969, I was the first teacher hired for the launch of the hotel management program at George Brown.

My former program co-ordinator at Ryerson had contacted me regarding job opportunities in teaching. He arranged interviews for me at three Toronto colleges and I was offered positions at every one. I chose George Brown because of its stellar reputation in chef training. I was only 23.

Our inaugural class was comprised of fifteen students. As new teachers, we scrambled to put together the course outlines. We developed the curriculum on a daily basis on top of the 24 classroom-based teaching hours required of faculty. Use of case study methodology became a common teaching tool. With only 15 students we got to know each of them very well. They were very understanding of the challenges we faced and we became their mentors as well as their teachers.

It took another two years before we had confidence that our program would be viable. That initial level of uncertainty required faculty to play a major role in the recruitment and

retention of students as the program grew. We also needed to develop inroads with local employers who had very little awareness and understanding of the role of colleges except for those hotels involved in apprenticeship training. Creating industry-based advisory committees was critical not only for ensuring the relevance of the curriculum but for the development of field placement opportunities for our students that would provide much-needed work experience and lead to employment opportunities for our graduates. Hotels such as the venerable Park Plaza, the newly opened Hyatt Regency, Sheraton Centre, Inn on the Park and Sutton Place were instrumental in validating the value of George Brown's new program as we competed for new students.

One of the extra teaching tasks I was assigned in 1971 dealt with "the hippie hair issue". In the early 70's a few male students in our hotel program grew shoulder length hair. In culinary lab classes they were required to wear hairnets, as were the female students. The final semester included the mandatory field placements in various hotel departments. Some departments were clear they would not accept male students with shoulder-length hair. That was going to be a challenge for me, too, as I had let my hair let my hair grow "longish" since becoming a teacher. I called the four students to a late Friday afternoon meeting at a local pub. With only a couple of years difference in our ages and two years of being in each other's lives every day we were able to reach a pact to trim our locks.

I wish I could grow mine back.