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## BRIAN CRISP, EDUCATOR AND COLLABORATOR

### THE CHARACTERS OF BRIAN CRISP'S

childhood read like a Flannery O'Connor story: developmentally delayed adults, battered women, runaway teens and recovering addicts. An aunt that exclusively wears silk pajama sets, consumes mass quantities of Southern Comfort, and drives a John Deere lawnmower for transportation. A former beauty queen for a grandmother. And Oscar, the one-legged French handyman, who suffered from a broken heart and literally became part of the family when he moved into the Crisps' home in Horse Shoe, N.C.

"As a child, I thought Oscar single-handedly rebuilt France after World War II. During one September malaise in the back yard, [my mother] Estelle unearthed more mystery than mud when, knee-deep in water, she asked gently, 'Oscar, do you still have family in France?' This middle-aged man had lost more than a limb in the war," Crisp writes in his blog, "In the Family Way" (<http://inthefamilyway-south.blogspot.com>).

"Oscar lived with us until he had to move into a nursing facility. That is family, be it blood or not. Estelle taught us to look beyond flaws, stick together and make it all better. It doesn't matter if you can't hold a buzz saw, manipulate a ratchet, or if you just have one leg. Still you matter."

That notion of equality and community has driven Crisp since his days at Furman, where he earned an English degree in 1996 — and where, he says, a class in medieval literature with William Rogers introduced him to concepts of collaborative learning that have consistently recurred throughout his career.

His journey has been a non-traditional one, taking him to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned degrees in theology and music; the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, to study curriculum design and instruction; and Minnesota College of Art and Design, for classes in design and marketing. Along the way he was ordained and worked with three denominations. He even presented a paper at a hip hop conference about the connection between the hymns of Englishman Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and the music of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls.

Crisp's eclectic interests extended to other areas. While he was in seminary, a professor introduced him

to Orff-Schulwerk, a theory, Crisp says, "that gives children the ability to compose the music they want so they better understand the fundamentals and are able to use music as a language to make meaning of the bigger world. There was a lot of theory and music history, but it was also fun and hands-on and experiential. And everyone was sort of acting and learning within the group dynamic."

He would later spend seven years at St. Paul Academy in the Twin Cities, working with colleagues in education and the arts. While there he serendipitously bought a book, Louise Cadwell's *Bringing Learning to Life: The Reggio Approach to Early Childhood Education*, which introduced him to an educational philosophy developed in post-World War II Italy in the town of Reggio Emilia.

The Reggio approach values a curriculum that emerges from a combination of children's interests, in-depth studies of concepts from the group, teachers as partners and learners alongside the children, and the classroom environment, often referred to as the "third teacher." In 1991 *Newsweek* hailed the Reggio Emilia school system as one of the 10 best in the world. Today it's the innovative basis for Google's on-site preschool for its Silicon Valley employees.

"Rather than giving children the right answer or forcing them to come up with the right answer, the Reggio approach asks them to construct theories and ideas that might not necessarily be right, but are new and able to be supported," Crisp says. "It teaches children to learn about themselves within their social schema."

Crisp continued exploring themes of authentic classroom connections and real world experiences as a context for learning as academic dean of a school in Louisville, Ky. Then, at a conference, he met Louise Cadwell. She flew him to St. Louis and offered him a job in the Reggio Collaborative, where he worked with several schools in music, curriculum design and professional development.

"It exposed me to a real collaboration of how to work. And then I had the opportunity to go into consulting full time, which felt like a good thing to do," he says. "I was torn about how to take the excitement of the collaborative and constructivist approaches



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of Reggio and Orff-Schulwerk and make them work together, not just in the lives of 600 students in St. Louis, but in the lives of thousands of students all over the United States."

These days Crisp is back in North Carolina finishing his second book, an ethnographic study of how children relate to and learn music. He recently launched his own firm, Crisp Consulting & Coaching ([www.crispconsults.com](http://www.crispconsults.com)), which helps families choose the school that's the best fit for their student and implement what he calls "intentional parenting for lifelong learners."

"My parents were so intentional. I once asked them what they were thinking when they were raising me," says Crisp, an only child. "My mom said they wanted me to know that I could do anything I wanted in life as long as I put my mind to it and got educated, and that everybody deserved equal chances even though they didn't have equal opportunities."

This philosophy of service and community is one reason the Reggio approach resonates with him. "Our house was always full of people, even though there were only three of us. When they were scared of their families, it was my family that took them in," he remembers. "I really appreciated that because it taught me that everyone has issues, but it doesn't mean you stop caring. It actually means you care more."

— NANCY R. FULLBRIGHT

*The author, a 1995 graduate, is a communications officer with Georgia Tech's Enterprise Innovation Institute in Savannah.*