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## From Hotel Halls to Hallowed Halls

For a former Empress page boy-turned brilliant Harvard professor, it all started with his dad and a piano

**Lindsay Kines**  
CanWest News Service

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It's a sunny Friday morning at the Oak Bay Beach Hotel and the man voted a favourite professor by this year's graduating class at Harvard University seems happy to be home. Brian Little, 62, will be wearing a sweltering, blue and gold doctoral gown later in the day for his class reunion at the University of Victoria. But right now the former Empress hotel page boy looks cool and relaxed in shorts and a golf shirt, a patio umbrella overhead, the ocean stretching out behind him.

"This is home," he says. "It really is home."

He grew up just steps from here in the house his father built with his own hands -- "everything except the electrical work" -- the house where his family gathered around the piano each night, singing and laughing.

It was there, perhaps, that the young performer first emerged. Brian Little, boy soprano, began



**CREDIT: Stuart Cahill, Carleton University**

**Psychology professor Brian Little, who grew up in Oak Bay, is one of the most popular teachers at Harvard University.**



**CREDIT: CanWest File**

**Among Brian Little's possessions are a Harvard academic planner of unknown vintage, a photo of his father at work and the triangle that his dad made for him that's proudly displayed on his desk at the venerated institution.**

singing on stage at age two and, even though puberty eventually stole his voice and left him with an "utterly mediocre baritone," he's still wowing university crowds all these years later.

His children have a theory about his teaching, he says. "They say it's my way of singing."

There is more to it than that, of course. There's an immigrant father's belief in the power of education; a young man's delight at scientific discovery; and the dedication of a born introvert, who, every day, goes against his nature to connect with his students.

But it all started with the singing, and there's no denying the fact that Brian Little has made it big at the Carnegie Hall of Ivy League schools.

A psychology professor at Carleton University, Little had already racked up a number of teaching honours in Canada when he won a fellowship three years ago to attend Harvard's new Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Initially, he was not expected to teach, but when a professor fell and smashed a leg, Little took her place and word of his abilities spread quickly. Last year, 70 undergraduates took his course and gave him a perfect 5.0 rating.

"Normally, outstanding professors get 4.2, 4.3, maybe you see a 4.5 or 4.6," says Adam Grant, one of Little's students. "I can't ever remember seeing a 5.0 in a class larger than 10 people before."

This year, the class almost quadrupled in size to 250 -- although the room was often overflowing with more than 300.

"We had to move out of three classrooms, because the class kept growing and growing," says Anne Hwang, a doctoral candidate and one of Little's teaching fellows. "It still wasn't big enough." The lectures, she says, often ended with standing ovations.

"The topic that I teach is personality psychology," says Little. "It's very hard not to be a good teacher of that, because it's so intrinsically interesting: 'Why are we like we are?' "



**CREDIT: CanWest File**

**A family photo of Brian Little when he was six years old.**

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His students think there's more to it than that.

"Brian Little is the most engaging, entertaining, and caring professor I have ever encountered," Grant, who nominated Little as one of Harvard Yearbook's Favourite Professors, wrote recently.

"Working with him has been the most rewarding experience I have had at Harvard; I cannot even begin to explain the myriad ways in which he has positively affected my life."

That Brian Little is at Harvard at all, let alone winning raves from students, is a testament to the influence of his father, who never graduated from high school.

Richard Little was pulled from school and put to work as a boy to support his family in Dublin. A clever, talented man, he became a cabinetmaker in England, before he saw the new land and "decided to come to the best place in the world ... and it was Victoria," Brian says.

Richard Little worked as a carpenter for more than 30 years at The Empress hotel, where he met his wife, Ada, who had emigrated from England. They built a house in the best neighbourhood they could imagine and raised a daughter and a son, both of whom went on to university.

"He never pushed," Brian recalls.

'He just took great delight in any academic success and it was always important to him. To him, education was something to be cherished."

His son learned that lesson well. Brian Little loved school, got shivers of excitement from new knowledge and insights into the world around him.

Once, in junior high, a science teacher came into class and said: "Here's today's question, 'Why are there more Joneses than Smiths in the Victoria telephone directory? You tell me tomorrow."

Inspired, Little went home and came up with an elaborate topographical explanation about how Vancouver Island was more like Wales than England and how this played a key role in attracting Welsh immigrants.

The next day, when the teacher asked for answers, Little put up his hand and volunteered the theory. So did another student, and another. Until, finally, the teacher said: "'OK, first lesson of science: There aren't more Joneses than Smiths in the Victoria telephone directory.'

"I got a chill up my spine," Little says. The lesson stuck and, to this day, he tells his students the same story, exhorting them to go back and check the data.

He also tells them, as he told this year's graduating class at Harvard: "Find out what gives you goose bumps or chills and follow it through."

Little followed his passion for science to Victoria College, which became the University of Victoria, where he graduated with the first class in 1964. There he also met a diverse group of teachers.

"Professors are a little bit like different kinds of wine," he says. "Students need to appreciate that there can be tart, chippy little wines and there can be rich, aromatic, deep wines, and that each, in its own way, can be

be rich, aromatic, deep wines, and that each, in its own way, can be delightful and edify."

From one professor, a classicist who taught Greek history with tears running down his cheeks, Little learned the importance of passion. From psychology professor Bill Gaddes, Little discovered the power of enthusiasm. Gaddes, he says, was so enthusiastic about his work that students couldn't wait to get to class to find out what he couldn't wait to tell them.

But Gaddes, who is 90 and still lives in Victoria, refuses to take credit for Little's enthusiasm. "I don't know whether you can learn that," he says. "I think it's built in. He had that as a student."

Originally enrolled in physical sciences, Little switched to psychology upon realizing he could do his own experiments -- "experiments that hadn't been done in the 17th century. "That," he says, "completely liberated me."

He went from UVic to the University of California at Berkeley, arriving the exact week that the student revolution began. The revolution was fascinating, but overly stimulating for the life-long introvert, who, in high school, sought refuge in the solitude of the Oak Bay boathouse to escape, he says, the "slings and arrows of outrageous adolescence."

A short time after arriving at Berkeley, Little took advantage of a Commonwealth scholarship to study at Oxford, returning to California later to get his doctorate.

To this day, his teaching strikes a precarious balance between the Monty Pythonesque whimsy of Oxford and the earnestness of Berkeley.

"I think that it has always been that creative tension between whimsy and gravitas that is something that professors who truly profess need to strive for," he says. "It's a little easier for me to fall on the whimsical side, but the students know, towards the end of the course I teach them, that there are sometimes tears in their eyes."

In many ways, Little appears to have absorbed the characteristics he so admired 40 years ago in that varied group of professors at the University of Victoria.

Like Gaddes, he has infectious enthusiasm. "I can hardly contain myself at times, I'm so excited about what I'm teaching."

And he cares deeply about his students. He estimates that he spends two hours a day answering e-mails from his students; his wife figures it's closer to three.

"We always know when we've taught, but we don't always know when the students have learned," he says. "One of the delightful things for me is to get these little e-mails -- or e-pistles, as I call them -- in the middle of the night, saying, 'Hey, Professor Little, something's just happened. I've just had my first child and I remember a lecture you gave back in 1982, and I just wanted to say, I didn't really get it then, but, Whoa! Whoa! Are you ever right!'"

"That is so delightful to have that continuing sense of engagement with these students."

The e-mails have also helped him connect with more introverted students, like himself, who might be reluctant to ask a question in class but are willing to do it by e-mail, in the middle of the night.

For the same reason, he also came up with the idea of getting his students to keep a research journal, where they can express what is really on their minds and which counts for marks in the course.

The e-mails and journal entries help fuel the "matters arising" component of Little's lectures, where he discusses issues raised by the students. "That way they feel as if it is truly a dialogue -- even though there are 250 students in there -- and they are participating. I think you can do that with a class of 1,000, frankly."

The dialogue often continues long after the lecture ends. Little devotes large blocks of time to meeting with his students one to one.

Hwang, who said the corridor outside Little's office is sometimes lined with people, believes Little had more requests to serve as a thesis adviser this year than any other Harvard professor.

Grant, who was one of those who sought Little's help, says the first time they met to talk about the thesis, the discussion lasted more than three hours. "He was willing to reschedule a bunch of meetings and put those aside for a student he had just met."

Little followed up with an e-mail several days later to say he was excited about the project, Grant says. "Which already was different from most professors who sort of begrudgingly take on a lot of students to do theses with them."

But it's in class that Little truly shines, in large part because, although the voice may be gone, he is blessed with impeccable comedic timing, Grant says. "He reminded me a lot of Robin Williams; I think he gets that a lot."

Little, for his part, says he is simply blessed with good material. "I don't think I've ever told a joke in my life," he says. "I don't think I could."

Instead, like Williams, he improvises. "Human personality and the frailties and the extraordinarily complex ways in which we live out our lives at so many different levels gives rise to such opportunities for humorous examples."

The humour, he says, builds up credit with the students which then allows him to be deadly serious on other matters that touch the hearts of his students.

"It's like a symphony," he says. "There's a slow movement and there's an allegro movement. You can be allegro vivace for three lectures and then largo."

Little, who could play the piano by ear at an early age, frames his lectures as if preparing a piece of music, always careful to balance the serious with the whimsical, the slow with the fast.

A student once wrote that he lectures with "great pesto."

"Isn't that wonderful?" he says, laughing. "I think she meant gusto."

Whatever the base -- gusto or pesto -- it works.

"The lectures are, in a sense, a bit of a performance and, I think, a performance in the same way that you have a musical performance," Little says.

All of which runs counter to Little's nature, which is shy and introspective. As an introvert, he learned early in life how to turn it "on" for a singing performance or his page-boy job at The Empress. The same, he says, applies to teaching.

After a lecture, he often escapes to a washroom, where he finds an empty cubicle, sits down, pulls up his feet so nobody can find him, and takes a long moment to reflect. Like those early escapes to the Oak Bay boathouse, the washroom retreats bring momentary peace and restore Little's true nature.

He once explained this to Peter Gzowski on CBC's Morningside, telling the famous radio host: "After a talk, I'm in cubicle nine." Gzowski confessed that, after a show, 'I'm in cubicle eight.' "

Gzowski later included the interview in *The Morningside Years* and sent Little a copy of the book with the inscription: "For Brian L -- Peter Gzowski (the guy in the next stall)."

"I cherish that," Little says, "because many of us are like that."

It's a fine balance, he says, because introverts do make good professors - or radio hosts -- attuned as they are to other people's cues, constantly scanning the room to make sure they haven't lost anyone. If they have, introverts will adjust their style mid-lecture, throwing in a different example, elaborating a particular point.

'The risk is that they can burn out, because in a sense you're acting out of character. That's why we really need those restorative niches. When you're 'on' with that degree of intensity, I think you would burn out very quickly, unless you're able to find those quiet moments on your own.'

The one sad note in all this is that Little's father never lived to see his son play Harvard. Richard Little died in 1992 at 93. But there is little doubt that he was already immensely proud of his boy.

Once, a few years before his death, he said to Brian: "You've done well, Son,"

"Thank you, Dad," Brian replied.

"You went to Berkeley."

"Yes."

"You taught at Oxford."

"Yes, Dad."

"You never went to Harvard, did you?"

Brian Little doubles over with laughter, recalling this conversation.

"It wasn't as if he was saying, 'Oh yeah, but you haven't gone to Harvard.' He genuinely couldn't remember whether I had gone there or not. He was 90! But this became the family's great story, 'This is my Uncle Brian. He's never been to Harvard'."


Then, a few years ago, the application for the Radcliffe fellowship came across Little's desk and, not surprisingly, it caught his eye.

He applied, won the competition, and took with him a wood-inlaid drafting tool that his father had made by hand. At Harvard, Little propped the triangle in his office, overlooking Harvard's schools of divinity and law.


"When people say, 'Why have you got that there?' " Little says, "I say, 'Oh, just to tell somebody, 'Yeah, I finally got to Harvard'."

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