

Richard Brynteson

Concordia University professor gets ...

Up close & personal

By **THEAN LEE CHENG**
leecheng@thestar.com.my

NEARLY every morning, a tall caucasian makes his way to the neighbourhood Hailam Kopitiam, located somewhere off Old Klang Road, Kuala Lumpur. The cafe has become the haunt of the Concordia University's professor from the College of Business and Organisational Leadership Richard D Brynteson over the past month.

On mornings that he does not turn up, it gets the Myanmar staff wondering about his absence.

Brynteson goes there to write and reflect. It is a time of renewal and assessment as he savours the scene before him and compares life here with another back home; where eight lakes are just a five-minute drive from home and he can just throw his kayak atop the car to get some fun.

So while his body is in that kopitiam, his mind and spirit is far away in another world, in another time.

Brynteson is from Minnesota, USA but he's lived in different parts of the world doing different things other than teaching.

Occasionally, he engages in conversation with the staff from Myanmar. Divided by a deep chasm, he is a professor and they, waiters from another foreign land, they have somehow come together, drawn to each other because of their comradeship as foreigners in a country not their own, learning about life in a strange land.

"Coming here has taken me out of my comfort zone. People here do things differently. It jars me and makes me look at life and things differently," he says.

Brynteson is here on a six-month sabbatical. While he is here, he aspires to do a number of things. He is writing a book on innovation; he has published two on other subjects and has a series of published works.

Brynteson is a man of many talents and interests. Maybe that is why he feels so pulled in different directions. There are many things he would like to do - being a war correspondent is one of them - but like most of us, he is limited by human frailties.

Before coming here, there were several options he had considered. One of them was to save the children in Haiti immediately after the earthquake. His brother-in-law is there, helping out.

"I told myself, they need people who are doctors. I have no practical skills but paint with water colours and make Christmas cards. I don't have a skill to help out. I can't build orphanages or houses, although I have washed dishes in four continents."

He pauses a few seconds. "I'd like to be a war correspondent, but I don't think that is going to happen."

There are so many things he would like to do, yet he is cautious, to the point of being self-deprecatory despite his many achievements.

"I am not a risk-taker," he says simply. That is ironic because as one goes through his resume, he seems to have taken a great many risks in his 54 years - his published works, workshops, seminars and presentations run into several pages, likewise the training he has had and the consultancy work he has done.

Although Brynteson's background is in marketing, he has moved on to various



BORN: 1955
PERSONAL: Divorced with 2 children
HIGHEST QUALIFICATION: PhD. In Adult and Vocational Education, MBA in Marketing
CAREER: Chemical industry - 6 years; college teaching - 22 years
NOTEWORTHY: 2 published books *Once Upon A Complex Time: Using Stories to Understand Systems*, and *A Manager's Pocket Guide to Innovation*
FAVOURITE FOOD: Chocolate
FAVOURITE PLACE: North Shore, Lake Superior
HOBBY: Watercolor painting, kayaking, biking
VALUES: I hope good ones.
INSPIRATION: Ghandi, Lincoln, anyone with resilience
 Richard D Brynteson

subjects. He taught advertising, human relations, management, and organisational behaviour.

He is now lecturing on creativity and innovation. How he goes about doing that is baffling but while he is here in Kuala Lumpur, a consultancy has lined him up to do an interactive one-day workshop on *Innovation for Managers and Team Leaders: The Manager's Innovation Toolkit*.

"You teach creativity and innovation by asking questions."

There were times when he told his students to list down 25 questions about a pram, or an orchid. They are not going to leave the classroom until they do. The objective: to sharpen their creativity and questioning mind.

Brynteson does not seem to be aware of it

but in many ways, he is more than a teacher. He is a leader and a motivator.

Yet, from the same man, came this statement: "The most important quality is self-awareness - how well do you know what you are good at, and what you are not." And that is the single most ironic thing about this man. He is a leader in his own right and yet does not seem aware of it.

Loving life and people

Brynteson loves life and people. And it is this single factor that has taken him out of his comfort zone, time and again, to different parts of the world to work on different things. He's worked on a kibbutz (a farming community where people live and work, sharing profits and decisions) in Israel.

He has been at one time an assistant manager in a coffee plantation in Guatemala, Latin America.

He has also worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Ecuador, South America and studied art history in Florence, Italy.

In short, he has done a myriad of things not connected to teaching, marketing or innovation. But all these experiences and encounters have made him a better teacher, leader and friend. And his enthusiasm for people and living comes across.

"I love teaching and working with students. I want to open up their minds to different possibilities. I cannot believe that at the end of the evening, from 5.30pm to 9.30pm, I am paid to do something I like." Therein lies the enthusiasm and hope for his students and the people he encounters.

Brynteson holds a strong connection with his students. Until today, he is still in contact with students he taught high school history in 1980.

"I enjoy my students. Many of them love a challenge. They see a problem and ask them-

selves how they can solve it. They are tenacious and will not let go (of hope) of their goals.

"I like people who have a heart and mind and who cares more than just about how to make more money. I like people who grow and who are challenged. All of us go through different stages of life. At 40, we are different when we were 30. When they are in my classroom, I am there to take them part of the way."

Brynteson says one of his students went from a secretary to become an executive vice-president; she is now retired and runs a quilt shop. Another went from a bank teller to vice-president of marketing.

"It gives me tremendous pleasure to see them grow and come up to their full potential." While some of his students have risen up the corporate ladder, others made decisions which positively touched the lives of others because they believe in doing the right thing.

"One of them told me, 'yes, Richard, I may have lost US\$7mil, but I'm glad I did the right thing. I have built a community for senior citizens, where they can go to the doctors, the coffee shop, and the lawyers, all within a community.' Another has built an office where you can jump from the second to the first floor to de-stress.

"All of us work very hard and there are times when we need to de-stress and have some fun. There is a minor league team in Minnesota. Their tickets are sold out game after game. There's a pig that runs around the place. People enjoy going to the games. It's not about winning or losing. People don't care about that but they are there to have a great time. It is about entertainment."

Creativity and Innovation

Brynteson's interest in creativity and innovation came about as a result of the comments of people around him. He is pretty much a thinker, analysing situations and problems in order to find a solution. There was a time when he was in the chemistry industry and had to develop non-toxic oven cleaners.

From products, he went on to marketing and developing strategies for marketing. But at the root of all that interest him is the mind and the thinking process.

He takes the ordinary and mundane, and considers how the actions of today is going to impact the future.

In his book *Once Upon A Complex Time*, he writes: "System thinking is thinking with wide-angle lens, not telephoto lens. (It) is seeing the connections between parts, not just the parts themselves. (It) is seeing the patterns and structures underneath events, not just the events themselves, (It) is examining the time and distance between cause and effect. Systems thinking is circular, not linear, thinking. (It) is an excellent problem-solving tool."

Let's take systems thinking and consider how it has affected Brynteson himself. Because he's been told often enough about his creative ideas, he went into lecturing the subject. He has learned from those around him that he is good in this.

"People keep telling me that I am creative. I kept coming up with new ideas for this and that. That was how I got into this creativity and innovation lectures. Creativity is being able to look at things and situations differently and innovation is applied creativity. Innovation is taking something and making it useful.

"We need to think innovatively. Most innovations are not coming from people who are brilliant but from collaboration between government agencies, corporations, think tanks, universities and foundations. It is not something that comes overnight but it is a process of working together for the common good," he says.