A Fundamental Philosophy

TO DR. JACK WEINSTEIN, THERE ARE NO DUMB QUESTIONS, JUST VERY PHILOSOPHICAL ANSWERS.
For the associate professor of philosophy at the University of North Dakota (UND) and 1991 Plattsburgh State grad, that's just the way it is.

"My wife, Kim, asked my mom something I was like a little kid, and she said, 'Exactly the same as he is as an adult.' I'm never a philosopher. I get to talk about absolutely anything I want when I want, and it's still philosophy," he said.

Wasting philosophical time has been key to Weinstein's success, both personal and professional, since arriving on campus nearly 30 years ago.

The philosopher and scholar returned to his alma mater this fall as a visiting professor in the Honors Program and Institute for Ethics in Public Life. It is a full-circle kind of experience for Weinstein because it was at Plattsburgh State that he first discovered his ultimate for philosophy.

By Weinstein's own admission, he was "an atrocious student" in high school, never imagining he'd get out of high school much less get into college. A phone call from the Students at Risk (STAR) Program at Plattsburgh State set him on a course that would ultimately change his view of the future and of himself. And although the day he and his mother drove up from New York to visit campus found them peering at the windows of locked buildings, he took what he saw.

"I came in as an English major," he said, "I was going to write the Great American Novel. But then I discovered philosophy and I fell in love. I remember knowing within the first or second day of class that I was going to get my Ph.D. in philosophy."

Indeed, by his senior year at Plattsburgh State, he was teaching "Philosophy of Activism" in the Honors Program, something Dr. David Mowry, director of the Honors Program and distinguished teaching professor of philosophy, called "groundbreaking."

"Jack wrote an advanced honors thesis on the philosophical foundations of community activism," said Mowry, who became a mentor to Weinstein and to whom Weinstein dedicated his second book, "On MacIntyre's..."

Weinstein went on to design an honors seminar and proposed to teach it, which he ultimately did with Mowry's help.

"Jack showed a natural interest in philosophical reflection from the time I first met him," Mowry said. "He was never satisfied with superficial reasoning or explanations. In making the world a better place, Jack realized that the world of ideas had to be coupled with concrete action, and corrective action had to be grounded in careful reflection. Those same commitments continued to grow and still define Jack Weinstein today."

Weinstein's minor in political science helped fort that passion for social justice, and he became politically active on campus, challenging the county's rule against college students voting locally in general elections. A class action lawsuit ultimately resulted in students gaining the right to vote where they went to school rather than only having absentee ballots as an option.

"That was incredibly satisfying," Weinstein said. And although on-campus politics eluded him - he never won an election in which he ran - he gave serious consideration to becoming a professional political organizer after graduation. But the reality of being politically active while in good school was that you can't have both, he said.

"Although I've spent the last 16 years studying justice, I found myself more effective in the classroom than I ever would have been in the political arena. I'm not a politician; I'm too straightforward. People don't like that," he said. "My wife says I'm more comfortable with conflict than any human being she's ever met. I'm a philosopher, right? We do it differently. I am who I am, and it's very conducive to philosophy."

These days, Weinstein's time is filled with writing - he's on sabbatical from UND in order to write his second book on Adam Smith - and with parenting his 2-year-old daughter, Adia, about whom he said during one of his lectures on campus: "I could weep when I say how much I am in love with her."

For someone who started out looking through the windows as an outsider, never imagining his life past graduation, Weinstein said his life "is so much better than I ever anticipated it could be. I might have gotten the idea that I was going to be a college professor, but living in Grand Forks, N.D., with a wife, a kid, a dog, a house? No, I never imagined that. I imagined myself being a lifelong New Yorker doing God knows what."