

Samuel Blumenfeld, at 89; conservative writer and phonics advocate

By Bryan Marquard | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 27, 2015

His mother was illiterate, and when Mr. Blumenfeld was a child, he struggled to help her learn the rudiments of reading and writing. “In the end he did teach her. She could write and sign her name,” said his niece Monique Bell-Zakkour of Livingston, N.J. “That led to this quest and pathway for him for the rest of his life.”

Focusing on education, he began publishing books in the early 1970s while living in South Boston. In a speech the Globe excerpted in 1977, author John Updike praised Mr. Blumenfeld’s “The New Illiterates: And How to Keep Your Child From Becoming One,” calling the book a “spirited indictment.” By the 1980s, Mr. Blumenfeld had published “Is Public Education Necessary” and his signature work, “Alpha-Phonics: A Primer for Beginning Readers,” which described how best to teach children. His last



GUSTAVO VARA BILLOTA

Mr. Blumenfeld was as kind and gentle in person as he was fierce on a written page.

essay, published on the conservative website WorldNetDaily several weeks before he died, showed that illness and the passage of decades had neither dimmed his passion nor softened his anger.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

“Millions of American children are still being made into reading cripples by how they are being taught in their public schools,” he wrote in a post dated April 14. “And Americans are as oblivious to the cause of this situation as ever. Indeed, the new federally financed Common Core Standards will guarantee continued educational malpractice in all the schools of America until there is sufficient resistance by parents to stop it.”

As gentle and kind in person as he was fierce on the page, Mr. Blumenfeld lived in Waltham for many years and died at home June 1 of leukemia. He was 89.

To honor his education legacy, the Samuel L. Blumenfeld Literacy Foundation will host a tribute Sept. 19 in North Reading, and is posting details online.

An advocate for using phonics to teach reading, Mr. Blumenfeld penned withering criticisms about the widely used whole-word method. He also was as forceful a writer about politics as he was about education. In years past, he was a writer and editor for John Birch Society publications, and more recently wrote an essay for jewsforjesus.org criticizing evolution as a “ ‘fact’ someone has yet to prove.” Much of his later work appeared regularly on WorldNetDaily’s website.

“Barack Hussein Obama will go down in history as having achieved what no one believed an elected American president could ever achieve, the destruction of our constitutional republic,” Mr. Blumenfeld wrote for wnd.com in March 2010, after the US House approved the president’s health care plan.

Wielding sarcasm in the debate over using torture to interrogate terrorist suspects, he wrote for wnd.com in May 2009 that “we must develop enhanced wrist-slapping techniques. These methods were originally perfected by nuns in Catholic schools. They used rulers. But that would be unusual and cruel punishment on the prisoners. So it is suggested that we use a wet rag or a limp wrist.”

“It’s almost like he had a slightly different personality on the page than he did in real life,” said Mr. Blumenfeld’s nephew Peter Bochner of Wayland. “Sammy was a very highly educated man. He was also a very gentle soul.”

Samuel L. Blumenfeld grew up in the South Bronx. He and Janet Bell, his next oldest and only surviving sibling, were born in the United States. Their three older siblings were born in Poland, spoke Yiddish and Polish, and worked for garment companies. Mr. Blumenfeld and his sister often went to movies, which “were a huge influence,” Bell-Zakkour said. “They were a window into another world.” Books held a similar allure and “the library was an oasis,” his niece said.

Right out of high school Mr. Blumenfeld volunteered to serve in the Army and saw combat in Italy at the end of World War II. Returning home, he used the GI Bill to graduate from City College of New York and also studied abroad, befriending expatriate US writers such as James Baldwin.

Working as an editor, first in New York and then in Boston, Mr. Blumenfeld was drawn to education as a topic for his own writing, and he taught in schools to get first-hand experience. His first book, published in the early 1970s, was “How to Start Your Own Private School: And Why You Need One.” Reviewing “The New Illiterates” for the Globe in 1974, Carmen Fisher said of Mr. Blumenfeld: “Neither glib nor hysterical, he speaks softly, but he carries a deadly weapon made of history and reason and logic.”

Mr. Blumenfeld’s final book was “Crimes of the Educators,” cowritten with Alex Newman.

“Sam was the type of man on whom all human progress depends: a man willing to stand courageously against the whole world gone mad — even if it meant standing all alone — if it meant standing with Truth, common sense, and righteousness,” Newman wrote on wnd.com.

Appearing before groups in venues such as public libraries, Mr. Blumenfeld “would captivate his audience because he had a beautiful speaking voice,” said William McNally of Windham, N.H., president of the Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Literacy Foundation. “He knew so many facts that he would enthrall the audience with ease,” said McNally, who hosted radio talk shows with him on WSMN-AM in Nashua. “And he could speak without notes.”

Hal Shurtleff, a friend who is the New England field representative for the John Birch Society, called Mr. Blumenfeld “a pioneer in the modern home school movement. Some of us refer to him as the godfather of the home school movement.”

Shurtleff added that among Mr. Blumenfeld’s favorite phrases were: “You don’t need puppets popping out of trash cans to teach children how to read” and “It is easier to believe a credible lie than an incredible truth.”

“If I could,” Shurtleff said, “I’d put those two statements on his headstone.”

Mr. Blumenfeld didn’t marry and his sister was his only immediate survivor. He was buried in Massachusetts National Cemetery in Bourne.

As an uncle, he “never came to visit without the gift of a book for his host, and it was always a book that he had spent some time trying to find,” said Bochner, his nephew. “It had to be the right book for the right person.”

Even into his 80s, Mr. Blumenfeld remained a vivid, inquisitive guest at gatherings family members hosted. “My friends would fall in love with him,” said his niece Carolann Biederman of Hawaii. “His ability to relate to people was really ageless and timeless.”

Ron Haslam, a Waltham neighbor who considered Mr. Blumenfeld his best friend, called him “one of the nicest, most generous men I ever met.”

Quick to offer assistance, Mr. Blumenfeld asked nothing in return, and if someone sought to repay him, “he’d say, ‘Do something for somebody that you don’t know, and don’t ask for thank yous,’ ” Haslam recalled. “He was like that all the time. He did things for people not expecting anything back. That’s the kind of man that he was.”

Bryan Marquard can be reached at bryan.marquard@globe.com.