

# A Global Career in Universal Design Shaped by Childhood Experiences

**Edmund A. Weaver, Jr.**

I was the oldest of seven children born to Emma Olivia (Keller) Weaver and Edmund A. Weaver. I was born in Tiffen Hospital, Tiffen, Ohio, on the morning of October 21, 1938. We lived on a rented farm just east of Carey, Ohio, in Crawford Township, Wyandot County. My parents married relatively late in life, when both were in their early 30s, at a time when it was considered unusual to marry after turning 30. My father was approached by People's Bank of Carey to buy the Ogg Farm (the first farm just east of Carey on US Highway 23, a major north-south highway that



ran from Michigan to Florida). It had been a show farm that was later taken over by the bank. The Ogg Farm was at one time among the most advanced general crop and beef fatten and finishing farms in the state. The Ogg's had their own electric generating plant, three deep wells with electric pumps, a large rainwater system that held thousands of gallons of water with a large brick house and three large barns and many outbuildings. At one time, there was a large dam and reservoir. The barns had many hay lofts, one of which was a 30-ft self-feeding loft. There were also two very large concrete silos – the largest in the area. My father told me that the Ogg's painted the soft brick house red and hand painted the mortar white. The barns and outbuildings were painted white with green trim. It was a very impressive farm.

I grew up enjoying the hard work and education that a farm life provided. When I was old enough, I helped my father by caring for the swine - Chester Whites, an all-white, high meat-producing animal. We also had a small herd of milk cows, beef cattle, chickens, and sheep. We also grew corn, wheat, oats and soybeans. We had clover and alfalfa hay, which we put up as dry hay in the barns on silages when corn was not available. Next to our house was an apple orchard with many types of apples. We had two large gardens with a wide range of fruit and vegetables. My mother would can the fruit and freeze it for year-round use. In the winter, we butchered six 250-pound hogs and one large beef animal that provided a year's supply of meat for us.

The Weaver family reached the large size of nine, but we were able to eat well with our quality homegrown food. At six years old, I started school at Our Lady of Consolation, in the same building my father attended school. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade classes were held in a two-room

wood-frame building next to the old wood-frame church. For 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, I moved to a four-classroom brick building a half-block down the street. This modern school had restrooms in the basement, so we didn't have to go outside, as we did in the old building, which had an attached restroom but was only accessible from outside doors. There was a third building, one block from the newer brick building, that housed the basketball court, gym and assembly hall, and that also served as our cafeteria. So even as children, we grew to be a hardy lot.

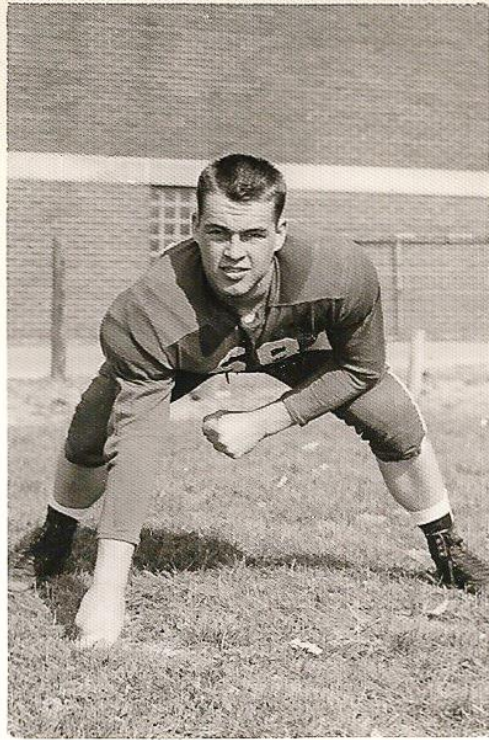
Our school day started off with mass in the grand brick church with large stained-glass windows, marble interior, and large murals. This Catholic church was a shrine, with upper and lower churches, under control of the Vatican. I only mention this because I was exposed to the world of art, history and religion through the shrine and the thousands of visitors we had each summer from all over the US, and even the world, who made pilgrimages to our "small" church (which I later learned was closer to a typical cathedral in size).

During the summer, I worked in food service and at the religious article stands. My upbringing was unusual. I was exposed to an expanded view of the Catholic religion through the exposure to the vast property of the shrine, school building, Pilgrim House, small hotel run by the nuns and a monastery/college for priests, all in a rural town of 3,500 in North Central Ohio.

As I stated, I was the oldest of seven – three brothers and three sisters. None of us stayed on the farm even though we all profited from being raised on one. Two of my sisters became home education teachers, and my youngest brother got his degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management. I got my degree in Industrial Design. My other sister was educated as a secretary and office manager, and later worked as a city clerk. The two remaining brothers worked as a draftsman and in factory production. My two oldest brothers and I helped around the farm growing up. My youngest brother had asthma so bad that he was unable to work around the farm due to the dust and pollen. He later went into retail. My sisters helped my mother with home care, food preparation and gardening. We all were active in 4-H, which began around 10 years of age.

As you might expect - being raised on a very productive farm, eating healthy food, working hard and being exposed to a healthy environment – I grew up to be a fast, tall and strong young boy. At the age of 11, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I was 5'9", 170 lb, resulting in the start of my football career at Carey High School. I was first string in both my 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade years on the junior varsity team. As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader I grew to over 5'10" and 175 lb. The opposing teams could not believe my size for my age. I started playing varsity football in August of 1953, weighing in at 6'0", 185 lb. I was a starter when the season began in September. As a freshman, I made the first team on both offense and defense and earned my varsity letter after the first six games.

On October 28, 1953, a week after my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, my life as I knew it took a major turn. I had contracted infantile paralysis. That afternoon, while walking up the stairs to my next class, my



left knee gave out. I continued to my class, not thinking much of it. After school, I went to the boys locker room, dressed for football practice, and walked the three blocks to our practice field. I started to warm up, and then it happened – while trying to run warm-up laps, I found I could not run, no matter how hard I tried. Finally, it hit me that something was wrong. My coach did not understand it or know what was wrong. He suggested that I go back to the school to take a hot shower and let the warm water run on my left leg. He told me that if I wasn't better by the next morning, to go see my doctor, Dr. Murphy. The next morning, I was worse, and needed a cane to walk.

My father took me to see Dr. Murphy, who asked my father and me a series of questions, and then said I might have polio. To be sure, he wanted to do a spinal tap and test the spinal fluid to see if I had the virus. Being in a rural county in North Central Ohio, Dr.

Murphy decided that he would perform the spinal tap at Wyandot County Hospital right away. The hospital was 10 miles away (10 very long miles). Dr. Murphy was the only doctor in the county that could do the spinal tap. The only other qualified doctor was on vacation. The spinal tap showed that I had polio. I was to be taken by ambulance to Ohio State University Hospital 80 miles away in Columbus. Dr. Murphy had studied at Ohio State, and, due to my mature size, thought that it would be the best hospital for my recovery. However, the ambulance driver misunderstood and took me to Children's Hospital in Columbus, where I was not pre-admitted, so I had to wait on a gurney in the hallway until they decided to admit me. I was put in Isolation/Quarantine, a double room with a very active 6-year-old boy, for what seemed like a lifetime. After being in Isolation for a few days, I was told to get packed, as I was to be transferred over to Ohio State University Hospital, but it never happened.

While in Isolation, I was fitted for a full leg brace, but when it was delivered (approximately two weeks late), it didn't fit. My leg had lost muscle tone and the brace was too big. After 2½ months of rehab in the hospital, I was able to leave the hospital and continue my rehab at home. After one month at home, I went back to school and finished my freshman year, passing all my classes. As a sophomore, I tried to do track and field (shotput, discus, and javelin), but could not get up to competitive distance. I became a trainer, working with the football coaches for two years, while also helping the basketball team as a score keeper. I had very good support from my high school coaching staff. During my senior year, I was named the assistant coach for the junior varsity basketball team. One night each week, I coached the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders' practice and helped them prepare for their CYO league games on Saturdays. Our team placed second

out of nine teams. Coaching this team taught me a lot that was useful later in life. My coaches, teachers, and classmates played a great part in my forming a positive attitude, resilience, and hardiness that motivated my life.

Besides sports, 4-H played a big part in my early life. In 1951, when I was 12 years old, I showed a dairy calf at Wyandot County Fair and received an A for the project. Because my job on our family farm was feeding the hogs in the morning and evening, the next year, I took five Chester White hogs to the Senior Fair open class – a marketing pig single barrow, pen of 3 marketing hogs, and a gilt. I was awarded Grand Champion Single Barrow, Grand Champion Pen of 3, and First Place Gilt (Grand Champion was awarded to an aged sow).

In the Junior Fair, the same animals took Grand Champion Marketing Pig Single Barrow, Grand Champion Pen of 3 Marketing Pigs, and Grand Champion Chester White (gilt). We sold the barrow animals at the livestock sale and kept the two gilts as breeding stock. This was my spending money, though I was encouraged to save most of it for college.

In 1954, I had a grand champion gilt. In 1956 and 1957, my Chester White gilts again took grand champion in the Junior Fair. In 1958, I also received a trophy in senior swine showmanship.

Another highlight of my 4-H Club life was attending Ohio Conservation Camp in Utica, Ohio, and the 4-H Club Congress at Ohio State. I served as president of our Junior Leadership County Organization and was master of ceremonies at the county 4-H award ceremony. I was honored as the recipient of the Danforth Award.

Although I wasn't able to farm as a career, 4-H served as valuable training for me as a farm youth and throughout the rest of my life. The 4-H leadership training prepared me for my professional life as a recognized industrial designer with an emphasis in packaging design for two major global corporations – Johnson Wax and Kraft Foods.

I married Frances Arnold, who was from the Akron area, in December 1961. We had two children – Michael and Kristen. With a vocational rehabilitation scholarship and working at Millington, I graduated from The Ohio State University in 1962 with a BFA in Industrial Design, a relatively new field at the time. I was always employed as a designer. I have over 23 years of experience worldwide in developing innovative package and product design solutions for domestic and international companies such as Kraft Foods and Johnson Wax. I hold 19 design and utility patents and broke ground in new technology and new markets in over 20 countries in Europe, North America, South America, and the Pacific. I loved meeting new and diverse peoples, experiencing their cultures, and enjoying their food.

We lived in Columbus for 10 years, Racine, Wisconsin for 23, Oshkosh for 8, before returning to Racine in 2004. Later, we moved to our current home in Kenosha, WI. It is a universal design

home that I designed myself – no steps, wide doors, cork floors, and other design elements that make life easier and are architecturally pleasing.

Though I retired in 1996, I continued to stay active. I've been a member of Toastmasters International for over 40 years. I managed our condominium community. I was on the faculty at UW-Oshkosh, where I trained W-2 case workers and specialized in physical disabilities and diversity. I was a mediator for the Winnebago County court system. I advocated for residents of long-term care facilities through the Wisconsin Program on Aging and Long-Term Care. I worked as a universal design consultant to Build America Universal Design Project for the City of Kenosha. I also enjoy being The Book Doctor at our granddaughters' school library – the kids tear them, I fix them.

I serve on the boards of the Kenosha County Division of Aging and Disability Services (ADRC) and Kenosha Area Family and Aging Services, Inc (KAFASI). I also volunteer as an AARP Wisconsin Advocate Volunteer.

The experience and knowledge gained by growing up on a farm, living off the land, growing crops, taking care of animals and operating equipment prepared me to be a polio *survivor*. Losing the use of my left leg helped give me a unique insight into understanding others' problems and needs, as someone might who lost one of their senses. Some in my situation might have dwelled on their disability, but I was determined never to give up. I was always looking for ways to improve, always looking for positive solutions. I drew on this newfound outlook to move forward in life, both personally and professionally. As an industrial designer, it drove me to create products and solve problems in the service of helping people across the globe. ■