



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“Family Values”
by Benjamin Sternhell
June 17, 2006**

My full name is Benjamin Simon Weissbrod Sternhell. I am named Benjamin after my Grandma’s brother Bernie, who was named after Grandma’s Grandpa Benjamin. I’m named Simon after Grandma’s other Grandpa Simon. I’m named Weissbrod after Grandma’s side of the family. I’m named Sternhell because that is Mom’s last name and was my Grandpa’s last name.

I was going to also be named Free after Grandpa’s mother Frieda, but Mom changed her mind. I want to add the name Free someday, so my name will be Benjamin Free Simon Weissbrod Sternhell. (... *Maybe not.*)

Benjamin means son of my right hand. Simon means he who hears. Weissbrod means white bread. Sternhell means starlight. I like all these meanings except Benjamin—because I’m *left*-handed!

You can see from the story of my name that one of our family values is family. My family is very important to me. We have Thanksgiving with Aunt Emily, Uncle Scott, my cousin Dan, Grandma—and Grandpa before he died. We have seders with all my Sternhell relatives, plus Mom’s cousin Ellen and my great-aunt Gloria from the Weissbrod side. The Sternhells also have a family email list so we can all write to each other even though we live in different parts of the country.

Our family has always enjoyed being together. When Grandma was a little girl during the Depression, she and her parents and her brother Bernie lived with her grandparents, Rose and Simon Weissbrod, and her aunts and their husbands and children *all* in a four-room apartment in the Bronx.

Maybe the grownups didn’t think that was so much fun, but Grandma and Bernie did.

Later Grandma’s family lived on the top floor of one Bronx apartment building and her four uncles and their families lived on the other floors, one on top of the other. When my great-great-grandparents Rifka and Benjamin came to visit every Sunday, they stopped off to see their children on every floor, starting at the top and walking down.

When Mom and I asked our family email list what our family values are, our cousin Josh said, “I think our family values are easy: unconditional love and unfettered criticism.” Paul said, “I would say that we value progressivism, a strong education, vigorous and healthy debate, and getting together as a family. We value Judaism as a source for our traditions and for our togetherness, if not always as a source of religion and moral guidance.”

Our family's basic values are love, family, social justice, education, and loyalty. My great-grandparents were more conservative and more traditional than we are now—they were Orthodox Jews—but they took the huge step of leaving their country and moving to this new world.

Most of my great-grandparents came here from the part of the world called Galicia when they were about the same age I am now. I'm not sure a family value is courage, but I do think what they did was brave.

My grandparents—Grandma Claire and Grandpa Sidney—were liberals who supported the Civil Rights Movement and broke away completely from Orthodox Judaism. They sent Mom and Aunt Emily to a Reform temple—but Grandpa was an atheist.

When Mom came home from Hebrew School in fourth grade talking about God, Grandpa sat her down and explained that God doesn't exist. He believed in education—he wanted Mom to study about Judaism—but he also believed in speaking the truth.

Mom and most of her cousins have been involved in political movements like the anti-Vietnam War movement and the feminist movement. Now a lot of us oppose President Bush and the war in Iraq, and the way rich people are getting richer and poor people are getting poorer. I tried to work for peace by going to anti-war demonstrations with Mom and my friends. We didn't stop the war, but we did try.

One of our strongest family values is questioning authority. None of us like to be told what to do. (This is very true of me!)

Grandpa was so much like this that he never became an officer in the Army—he wouldn't follow orders—and he always fought with his bosses at work. And when he was my age, he refused to have a bar mitzvah himself.

At all our family seders—when Mom was a little girl and when I was younger too, until Grandpa died when I was 9—the family always made sure that Grandpa read the passage about the wicked son. He liked being the wicked son—and I think a lot of us like talking back, being rebellious, and thinking differently from how most people think.

There's another way I like being different: I also have a birthfamily. I don't know what all their family values are, but one of my birthmother's values and one of Mom's values are the same: creating the best possible family for me.

And I know my birthmother valued education. One reason she chose Mom to be my mother was that Mom sent her a picture of our apartment with shelves full of books on every wall.

When I was born in Sioux City, Iowa, Mom had been wanting a baby forever. She flew to Iowa to be there when I was born. She was crying the whole time, on the big plane from New York and the tiny plane from Minneapolis. Someone asked her if she was going to a funeral. She said, "No, I'm going to a birth."

My birthparents aren't Jewish and when I was born—ten days before Christmas—my birthmother said that she was giving Mom the best Christmas present in the world. Mom agreed.

I think it's great having a family and a birthfamily. It's like a privilege, something special to talk about. But I like the last name Sternhell a whole lot.

So what's the family value here? Well, love, of course, and celebrating our family history whatever it happens to be. And creating our own family, and enjoying and appreciating the family we've got.

I'm a Sternhell/Weissbrod/etc/etc—and I think that's pretty cool.