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Sapere Aude – Dare to Be Wise: John B. Lowe

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Abstract

Sapere Aude – Dare to Be Wise is a unique editorial conversational interview-type feature. It is an attempt to deep dive into an Academy members' background, formative experience, and education – specifically, to extract factors that contributed to their development and evolution as a professional, as well as their success as a prominent researcher in the health behavior arena. Every Academy member selected has a different story to tell and numerous models for success will emerge from this exploration of the membership.

Keywords

Sapere Aude

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CHILDHOOD

Full name: John Bruce Lowe

Tell us about where you were born and how you grew up.

As a kid, I grew up in Austin, Texas, in the 1960s, Austin is home to The University of Texas and State of Texas government. It was a wonderful place to grow up. I could reach most places by riding my bike. I was surrounded by music at home as my dad loved show tunes and university fight songs. Locally, it was a hub for live country music where Willie Nelson was beginning his career, and Jerry Jeff Walker was playing in the bars.

What about your education, and what did your parents do for a living?

I grew up in a household that valued education. Although my dad was born in England, he became a U.S. Army Air Corps fighter pilot in the South Pacific during World War II. After the war, he attended the University of Michigan, where he met my mother in a biochemistry class. My grandfather was Scottish, and my mum was Hungarian. My dad graduated from the University of Michigan, with a master's degree in pharmacy; my mother was a biochemist with a master's degree in biochemistry. My dad chose to pursue a PhD in pharmacy at The University of Texas and my mother had a full-time job raising my sister and me. After we began driving, she took a job with the Internal Revenue Service in Austin. Although my dad never completed his degree due to a foreign language requirement, he spent his professional life working as a pharmacist. I believe my difficulty in learning foreign languages is a genetic trait passed down to me.

What were your interests in high school?

I spent a lot of time with baseball, swimming, and participating in the marching band. I played the trumpet, and later, the baritone. I put effort into my schoolwork (not) and earned good grades so I could pursue the activities I loved. In my junior year of high school, I took a German language class because I wanted to sit in a class with a girl who had caught my eye. Looking back, I should have given more thought to this and learned a language I could have used more often in Texas, such as Spanish.

EDUCATION

Tell me about your experiences getting your undergraduate degree.

I completed my undergraduate degree at The University of Texas at Austin, where I primarily focused on being a member of the Longhorn Band and participating in the Tejas Club (a fraternity). I also played baseball and enjoyed campus life while studying radio, television, and film. What drew me to this program was the chance to be creative and the fact that it did not require a foreign language. Recognizing that few people achieve notable success in the television industry and coming from a hard science family, I enrolled in courses such as organic chemistry, physics, and other science-related subjects. My transcript features excellent courses in my major, including "History of Russian Films and Television Productions," as well as various science electives. A knee injury affected my ability to play baseball. After completing my undergraduate studies, I spent nearly six months creating educational videos for the State Law Association before being accepted into The University of Texas Health Science Center Medical School in Houston.

What inspired you to get your MPH?

While in Houston, I needed to complete a statistics course. Due to scheduling conflicts, the only available option was at The University of Texas School of Public Health in Houston, where Jay Glasser served as the instructor. Jay later became president of the American Public Health Association, which greatly inspired my interest in public health. I took the opportunity to enroll in additional courses at the School of Public Health and eventually earned my MPH in urban health. After completing my other degrees, I was lucky enough to receive a scholarship, which allowed me to enroll in a doctor of public health program.

Were there professors who made an impression on you during this time?

During my doctoral studies, I dated a fellow PhD student who happened to be the daughter of the Dean of The University of Texas School of Public Health, the esteemed Raul Stallone. Dean Stallone had a major influence on my career. I would visit the family home and have the chance to enjoy a beer while discussing public health and education. It was an incredible experience to sit with the Dean of the School of Public Health in his living room and converse about public health and medicine. I have remained friends with his daughter for 40 years, and I often catch up with her at the American Public Health Association's annual conferences.

Now tell me about your doctoral work and your relationship with your major advisor.

During my doctoral education, I remember there was a seminar held every Friday at the School of Public Health. Attendance wasn't mandatory; however, looking at the auditorium, one wouldn't know it was optional. Afterwards, there were beers outside, and no one ever got drunk. I had the opportunity to share a beer and chat with the

faculty, getting to know them, not only for their incredible knowledge, but also for who they were personally. This was a trait that I tried to instill in my faculty during my years as a department chair and later as a dean, encouraging students to engage with faculty as real people who also happened to be intelligent.

During my MPH program, I was fortunate to take a behavioral sciences course with Professor Dave Martin. Dave focused on researching tobacco and other drugs. He took me on as a student and mentored me during my dissertation on smoking cessation. At the time, I didn't realize it, but he gave me excellent advice on my dissertation and showed me how to be a good supervisor, which helped me many times. Dave Martin was also an outstanding lecturer, and it is worth noting that much of my performance in class and at conferences came from observing Dave. Albert Bandura was right; we learn more from modeling than doing. Many other professors at the School of Public Health also influenced my development as a public health professional.

PROFESSIONAL LIFE***Let's move beyond your education time and talk about your career.***

I didn't pursue my public health training to become an academician. I was so passionate about the field of public health, especially behavioral science, which becoming an academician never crossed my mind. After completing my doctorate in public health, I had the opportunity to work in Kansas. I remember holding a map of the United States, imagining cutting a hole in the middle, and saying I would work anywhere still on the map. As with most things, the best offer came from Topeka, Kansas, to work in public health, right where the hole was in my map.

Upon my arrival, I was approached to see if I would be willing to give lectures to students. "How do you do this?" I

remember thinking in that I had never given a lecture in my life. They handed me a textbook and a workbook and asked me to teach these junior- and senior-level health students. Although the students gave me complimentary reviews, it was the most terrifying and probably the worst course I've ever taught. I survived several semesters. Thereafter, I had the opportunity to attend the American Public Health Association meeting. Like most young professionals, I submitted applications for jobs that piqued my interest. At that meeting, I was interviewed by Dr. Richard Windsor, who was affiliated with the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB); I was subsequently recruited there as an assistant professor and researcher to lead a National Heart, Lung, Blood Institute (NHLBI)-funded smoking cessation project focused on pregnancy in Birmingham, Alabama. I learned a lot from Richard Windsor and other academicians at the UAB School of Public Health. I was fortunate enough to receive several opportunities, which I will explore in more detail later. Before I knew it, I had become an associate professor and transitioned to a full-time academician and researcher. My professional life has been a series of opportunities that have been presented to me. At no time did I really plan my career, but as opportunities arose, I took the risk and am now able to look back on over 40 years in the profession. As the Irish would say, "chance your arm."

What has been your proudest professional accomplishment to date?

There have been many proud professional accomplishments in my career. I was fortunate to land on my feet and work with incredible people at UAB. I believe that the work I did with Richard Windsor, assisting predominantly Black pregnant women in quitting smoking, was, at that time in my career, my most outstanding achievement. As the Department Chair, Richard Windsor believed that every academician in his

Department of Health Behavior should have a full-time administrative assistant. This fantastic opportunity provided me with the resources to write grants and secure funding from the NHLBI including National Institute of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It also made writing and editing manuscripts for publication much easier. Back then, we did not have word processing as we do now. It was an exciting time when the UAB School of Public Health bought typewriters equipped with memory tapes. This eliminated the need to retype entire documents whenever a sentence or word was altered. The most enormous excitement came when computers were introduced, allowing us to use floppy disks to store our work and make changes more easily. During those days, we didn't have email, so writing an article with colleagues at other schools of public health involved printing the manuscript and mailing it so they could make handwritten revisions and send it back. I then reviewed their comments individually and adjusted the manuscript file stored on a floppy disk. Although this process was slower, it produced high-quality articles ready for publication. At this point, I adopted a heuristic method that I've continued in my career – I always worked on three manuscripts simultaneously. One focused on data analysis, another on drafting, and the third on revising. I maintained this approach throughout my career, even in today's modern world.

During my career, I have been privileged enough to have many professional accomplishments, including serving on review committees for NIH, CDC, and the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, among other awards. My proudest professional accomplishment was the Research Laureate Award I received in 2011 from the American Academy of Health Behavior. This esteemed honor welcomed me into a community of remarkable researchers, with whom I enjoy great relationships, even

though I haven't been the best at keeping in touch.

What was your most notable or favorite publication in your career to date?

Among all my publications, the one that didn't earn a platinum or even a gold citation for its frequency of citation is an article I wrote for *Glamour* magazine about smoking during pregnancy. I tell colleagues that I was published in *Glamour*, omitting the fact that it was because I wrote about a health issue. I have no idea if anyone read the article in *Glamour*, but I hope that at least one person did and that it helps save a baby's life.

Describe the most courageous things you have done in your academic career.

During my time at UAB, I had two memorable opportunities that shaped my career. The first was to visit the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, to conduct research similar to the work I had done and published in the United States. UAB granted me a two-month sabbatical for this visit and research. It was a fantastic opportunity, and being a cheeky young lad back then, I cheekily told them, as I was leaving, if they ever had a position that would recruit me away from a tenured faculty role, to give me a ring. As it happened, the University of Queensland secured funding from the Commonwealth and state governments, as well as the Cancer Society, to establish a cancer prevention research center in the Faculty of Medicine. I had a supportive wife who said, "Let's go on this five-year adventure," which eventually turned into a 10-year journey that lasted nearly 15 years before we returned to the United States. This was one of the riskiest moves I've ever made, as I left a tenured role to accept a five-year contract in a country I had only visited once.

My second opportunity with UAB involved being part of the John Sparkman

Center for International Public Health. This was my first introduction to working in countries such as Guatemala, Mexico, and the Caribbean. This experience enabled me to train academic staff in delivering our MPH program at the University of Chiang Mai's School of Dentistry and School of Medicine. This opportunity was provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) to UAB to boost public health in Thailand. I learned a lot about teaching in a second language and some English sayings found in textbooks. For instance, the term "rule of thumb" does not translate directly into languages like Thai, and I now laugh when I recall being asked to explain what "rule of thumb" means. Throughout these experiences, I formed strong friendships and professional relationships with colleagues who have continued to collaborate with me, expanding my professional network.

As I've already mentioned, I had the chance to move to Australia to serve as the director of the Cancer Prevention Research Centre at the University of Queensland. This role was primarily research-focused, but it held the academic title of Reader, which is now more commonly referred to as Associate Professor. Because Australia was still largely governed by the Commonwealth academic system, there was only one professor at the medical school.

A few colleagues thought I was risking my career by heading "Down Under" and that I would never be heard from again; however, several leaders of this organization were supportive of my taking the position.

Moving to Brisbane, Australia, was a daring step. First, everything was in a metric system, and I grew up using imperial units. In shops, one wouldn't find ounces and pounds; instead, they used grams and kilograms, and I had to learn what 25 degrees centigrade feels like outside.

Whereas the Cancer Prevention Research Centre was part of the Faculty of Medicine, my academic appointment was in the Department of Social and Preventive

Medicine. As director, I was fortunate to recruit the core staff of the Centre, and I must admit I made good choices, as they have all gone on to remarkable careers beyond our time together. As a cancer prevention research centre in Queensland, Australia, we primarily focused on skin cancer. Queensland was the skin cancer capital of the world, so it made sense for our centre to be recognized for our work in skin cancer prevention and control. At that time, there were two other cancer prevention research centres in Australia – one in New South Wales and one in Victoria. Each of those centres focused on a different aspect of cancer, but we all collaborated across various areas of prevention and control.

This part of my career taught me the value of humility because I was an American in Australia and, as was pointed out to me, an outsider. I was referred to as an alien by a colleague in the medical school. I hope I have consistently demonstrated the importance of humility.

I believe that during my time as Director of the Cancer Prevention Research Centre, we conducted innovative research in cancer prevention and control, which remains regarded as pioneering work. Most of the time, we managed 8-10 research grants with our small team of four. This included a biostatistician, a behavioral scientist, a health educator, and me.

During my time in Australia, I was appointed editor-in-chief of the *Health Promotion Journal* of Australia, the official publication of the Health Promotion Association of Australia. It was a great opportunity for training and learning. When the editorship of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (ANZJPH), the official journal of the Public Health Association of Australia, became available, I applied to become its editor-in-chief. My previous work on the *Health Promotion Journal* provided a solid foundation for my application to this prestigious publication. This was a fantastic opportunity to connect with leading

researchers in public health from Australia, New Zealand, and around the world.

After my third five-year contract, my wife believed it was time to return to America and introduce the children to their homeland, with us accompanying them. By then, we all held dual citizenships, and as the kids turned 18, they could choose where in the world they wanted to live. America was home to my wife's parents. The children's perception of America was largely shaped by what they saw on television, which didn't accurately reflect life in the United States. We gathered the family, and I was offered the position of department head at the University of Iowa's College of Public Health. Here in Australia, we often talk about going to the University of the Sunshine Coast to enjoy the best of both worlds – living in paradise and obtaining a top-notch education. An individual who grew up in Texas, worked in Alabama, and lived in Queensland was now in an environment where it snowed before Halloween and kept snowing through Easter. I'm sure you get the picture. The University of Iowa was an exceptional academic institution and a leader in CDC-funded research and NIH research.

During my time at the University of Iowa, I had a supportive dean who performed at a high national level. One lesson I learned from him was what a dean needs to do. I successfully competed for and was funded by a coveted Prevention Research Center (PRC) and the Iowa Tobacco Research Center. I also participated in the executive committee of the CDC Injury Prevention Research Center while at Iowa. After enduring five winters in Iowa, it was time for me to return to Australia and the warm weather.

My experience at Iowa also led to an unusual outcome – I was invited to participate in a research study in Kyiv, Ukraine. This study aimed to examine the chronic disease education methods employed by family medicine physicians regarding their patients. We also had the opportunity to pose several lifestyle

questions to these physicians. I recall that a prestigious journal challenged the original manuscript because we reported a 100% response rate to our questionnaire. We had to clarify that we had the support of the Ministry of Health, and all family medicine physicians in Ukraine are government employees. Their participation was compulsory. I am uncertain whether a U.S. ethics committee would have approved it; however, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health was helpful in ensuring that the physicians completed our survey.

What I didn't know at the time was that during this visit, I would meet the professor of medicine from Odessa National Medical University and make a true friendship. Decades later, I was supervising several pediatricians as they completed their PhDs. I was awarded an honorary professorship at the National Medical University of Odessa, Ukraine.

After overcoming several weather challenges in Iowa, I decided to return to Australia. I was offered the position of Dean of the School of Health and Sports Sciences. This role provided valuable insights into various aspects of allied health, including exercise physiology, dietetics, occupational therapy, biomedical sciences, and public health. I learned about the complexities of accrediting agencies. My time in the College of Public Health was highly beneficial, as accrediting standards are similar across public health and allied health. One spends hundreds of hours preparing, only to have the review panel request more information, and they visit at your expense. Ultimately, one receives accreditation or re-accreditation. The school was newly established and initially had just ten academicians from around the university. From 2007 to 2022, the school expanded from a small team of academicians to over 120 staff members, plus more than 200 additional staff.

Additionally, upon returning to Australia, I was invited to become a senior editor of the *ANZJPH*. Two years later, as noted previously, I assumed the role of

editor-in-chief of the *ANZJPH*, a position I held for the following 15 years. The experiences I gained from both my academic role and as editor-in-chief provided me with opportunities like sitting down with the Prime Minister to develop a public health plan, meeting our Olympic gold medalist, and holding an Olympic gold medal (by the way, they're heavy). I had many more opportunities and sometimes faced both challenging but rewarding experiences.

Tell me about your philosophy that guides your research, claims of inquiry, and other academic pursuits.

Our work at the CDC-funded prevention research center ranks among my best efforts in community development and engagement with community partners. Using action research in a rural community in Iowa proved rewarding. We successfully built a genuine partnership with a rural Iowa community. I shifted my philosophical approach from investigator-led to community partner-based research, and I continue to uphold that stance.

Professionals in any field have been known to say there is a price for success. To what extent has that been your experience in the academic world?

I cannot say there was a negative price to pay for my achievements in the profession. As most of us know, there was a seven-day workweek, but I had flexible hours to take my wife to dinner, attend my daughter's swim meets, or go to my son's baseball games. The fact that we all stay up late and work long hours is a choice we make as academicians. That said, I would not have changed anything in my professional life.

My mentors, such as Larry Green and Richard Windsor, among others, were all talented, did excellent work, and were approachable and helpful to others. Even now, if I need an opinion on something, I

can phone or email Larry. I hope I also have demonstrated these same qualities.

I've had few regrets in my life, but one I truly regret is not thanking the people who influenced me. Most of these individuals might not have done anything directly for me, but by simply being themselves and giving me the opportunity to observe their actions and behavior, I genuinely wish I could thank them. Sadly, many have passed away, and that chance is now gone.

When your professional career ends, how would you like to be remembered?

In the end, it won't be the number of citations I receive, my H-index, or the dollar value of grants I've secured; instead, I hope to be remembered for the relationships I've built with dear friends, colleagues, and former students. When I first started supervising my doctoral students, I enjoyed sitting down with them over coffee to discuss their dissertations. However, as circumstances changed, the administration's focus on managing a department or school drew me away from this thoroughly enjoyable, relaxing, and rewarding activity. The good news now is that I do have time to share coffee with my PhD students as well as mentor public health students at various universities in Australia. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting one of my two-dimensional PhD students (whom I'd only met on Teams) face-to-face at a conference in three dimensions.

LIFE OUTSIDE ACADEMIA

What are some leisure-time activities for which you have a passion?

I've been truly blessed in my life. I ended up in paradise, just 100 steps from the Pacific Ocean and a ten-minute walk to one of the most stunning beaches in the world. I've got great friends here in Australia, in the United States, and all around the globe.

These days, you'll find me paddling an outrigger canoe or being on a rescue board, spending time at the beach as a volunteer Australian surf lifesaver. As lifesavers, we patrol our public beaches, rescuing anyone in trouble in the ocean and making sure they see another day. To stay fit for these roles, I regularly swim, walk, and train in first aid and resuscitation. Being part of an Australian surf lifesaving club feels like being part of a big family. Each year, I need to pass a proficiency test in a specific skill. When I eventually get too old to pass my exams, you'll find me sitting on the beach watching the waves roll in.

I have stepped down from my official role as editor-in-chief of the *ANZJPH*, but I still review manuscripts for both that journal and this one. You can still find me in Canberra, our nation's capital, where I contribute to advancing a public health policy agenda. Upon leaving the university, the vice-chancellor and president awarded me the title of emeritus professor. Recently, I was introduced as an emeritus professor at a conference where I was giving a keynote speech. The person introducing me was a good friend of mine, and he pointed out that the reason we call ourselves emeritus professors is that it's not politically correct to call us old professors.

Which books outside of Academia would you recommend for others to read and why?

One of the books I highly suggest all academicians should have in their collection is *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Dr. Spencer Johnson. It's a book you can easily read while traveling on a plane, and it helps you understand yourself and others when it comes to how they adapt, or don't adapt, to change. The only constant in my professional journey was that it was never steady. Looking back, I found this changing environment quite enjoyable; it was never dull. Although it was frustrating at times, it motivated me to keep pushing forward in this field. When things got tough, my main

way to cope was to put on a Jimmy Buffett album and listen to his wise words, which helped keep everything in perspective. Always remember the wise words of Jimmy Buffett, who was wise beyond his years. Just listen to his songs like “Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes.”

A senior mentor once told me that in academia, after ten years in a role, you either need to reinvent yourself at that institution or move on. As you can see in these writings, I enjoy moving on and, more importantly, creating. In all my academic roles, I was hired to create. I was never much for maintaining or finishing up. Each of these aspects is commendable, and you should decide what kind of environment suits you best – either creating something new, taking it to the next level, or maintaining it. If you grasp this simple concept, you'll always be doing what you enjoy.

If you were not doing what you are doing career-wise, what would you be doing?

When I think back on my life so far, I realize that if I hadn't become an academician, I might have taken a different route as a professional baseball player or a pub owner. The idea of owning a pub has always appealed to me.

What is the best piece of advice you would pass along to new investigators today?

My main takeaway is that we learn many heuristics throughout our lives. A couple of basic ones are never to turn down a job you haven't been offered, and never to refuse to do something without weighing up the benefits and considering the positives. A piece of advice from a mentor several decades ago, which has helped me in my academic career, was “be where you are at.” In other words, leave the previous meeting or activity behind and don't think about it during your next one. If you're always present, meetings or activities are more likely to turn out positively.

Another cautionary word of advice to younger academicians – never put your name on something you aren't deeply involved with. Among more than 200 peer-reviewed articles and 250 other manuscripts, I can offer a detailed understanding of each project. One of my more challenging experiences was as editor-in-chief when reviewers of a manuscript discovered that the data had been falsified. If there is an error or something worse in the manuscript, you are just as responsible as the first author, who may have been accountable. In my role as editor-in-chief, I unfortunately had to handle issues of inappropriate findings involving one of my colleagues as the last author.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Lastly, I am reminded of a quote from Homer who said, “After the event, even a fool is wise.” I want to conclude by thanking Elbert Glover (Glover) and Robert McDermott for allowing me to share these words, and a special thanks to Lisa Benz Scott for her comments and edits on earlier drafts. Finally, to all my colleagues around the world, I wish them the very best in life and their careers. God bless.

Editor's note.

Dr. Lowe joined the American Academy of Health Behavior in January 2001. Ten years later in 2001, he was selected as the 11th Research Laureate of the American Academy of Health Behavior for his contributions to health behavior research.

Elbert D. Glover and Robert J. McDermott are the Feature Editors of *Sapere Aude*.