Guy W. Wallace, CPT

Our brother in performance improvement, Joe H. Harless, 71, a key figure since the mid-1960s in the development of human performance technology at NSPI and ISPI, passed away while on a family vacation on October 4, 2012.

Many of us who have been active with the Society for a long time had an opportunity to see Joe again when he attended ISPI’s 50th Anniversary Conference in Toronto after having retired back in the mid-1990s. He came out of retirement and made one last presentation to us, sharing as he always had. Those who were newer to ISPI had their one opportunity to meet with, talk with, and hear from ol’ Brother Joey.

In this memoriam, we have asked many of Joe’s colleagues from work and from the Society to reflect on the passing of Bubba. I asked Joe’s good friend, Bob Mager, to do us all the honor of starting this tribute off.

He took our technology seriously and everything else lightly.

—Sivasailam Thiagarajan [Thiagi]
Joe’s passing represents another giant loss to the performance improvement world. But in addition to his serious contributions to the field, I’ll always remember the fun we had during the NSPI Conferences (and during hilarious dinners we shared in Atlanta).

In particular, I cherish the memory of the scam Joe and I concocted during his year as NSPI (now ISPI) president. Joe had announced that his banquet speaker would be an Australian named Dr. Dovard I. Joseph. But when the time arrived, Joe had to announce that Dr. Joseph would NOT be able to attend and that he had no substitute on hand. Therefore, he would use his prerogative as president to select someone at random from the audience to give the banquet speech! Whereupon he walked slowly through the audience with finger poised, staring at each diner in turn, while everyone in the audience tried to make himself or herself invisible. They looked away as he passed, bent down to tie a shoelace, and covered their faces with a napkin. After the tension couldn’t rise any higher, Joe suddenly pointed to me and shouted, “Mager!”

Enough air was expelled from collective lungs to float a hot-air balloon; you could almost hear the collective blood pressure dropping. It was a great scam that we’ve laughed about ever since. Especially because for several years after, people still believed Dovard I. Joseph was real.

So, we’ll miss Joe Harless, not only for his contributions to the world of performance improvement, both in the industry, business, and military arenas and in children’s education, but for the exchange of ideas shared at the convention bars…and his love of a good scam. Rest in peace, Joe.

—Bob Mager

I have known Joe for over 40 years, and it was wonderful to see him at ISPI’s 50th Anniversary. I first met him when I was in high school and attended my first ISPI conference and over the years attended many of his brilliant sessions. His classic book, An Ounce of Analysis (is Worth a pound of Objectives), has remained a key resource for me.

When I was president of ISPI, I asked Joe to be the dinner keynote speaker, and I was delighted when he accepted. To this day his evening presentation, “The Wizard of Newnan, Georgia,” continuous to be an exemplar for ISPI presenters: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeOZ9oJR1k. Joe’s contribution to our profession will live on through his books, articles, and presentations. It was great seeing him at the 50th anniversary Past President’s lunch and to attend his session. And yes, Joe, I started to act on the advice you gave me….

—Roger M. Addison

Joe taught me how to focus on accomplishments, how to conduct meticulous performance analysis, about the power of job aids, and how to make a business of performance improvement. His big heart and generous spirit, combined with a deep humility (sometimes masked by good ol’ boy humor and bluster) made me love him like an older brother and want to pass on what I learned from him to as many others as possible. Along with B.F. Skinner, Ogden Lindsley, and Tom Gilbert, Joe was among my most important teachers.

—Carl Binder

Vendor, mentor, friend, confidant, competitor, and colleague. Those six words basically sum up my relationship with Joe in the just over 40 years since we first met. They also reflect, pretty much in order, the evolution of our relationship. At one point, Joe informed me that in the previous few years I had purchased over 50 copies of An Ounce of Analysis and he wondered what I was doing with them. The answer, of course, was that I was constantly giving copies away to people I felt could learn from it. I will let others far more qualified than I speak to what Joe brought to the field. The core of our relationship was as a friend and professional mentor. What endeared him to me was that Joe was, for our business, the first master of the sound bite long before that term came into common play. His sense of fun and humor, and his willingness to truly engage with those he deemed intellectually capable, was nothing short of remarkable. When I made my move into consulting, he advised me to keep in mind that “the value of a consultant varies in direct proportion to the miles traveled to the job site,” so think big and market widely. Damn good advice in the end. What I will miss the most is the unique humor and understanding. Whenever I got totally fed up and disgusted with our field, a client, a project, or a colleague, Joe was always a calming influence with a pointed sense of humor that gave me new energy and drive. He would have me laughing at myself and the situation simultaneously with a clearer perspective and drive to reengage—a talent I will sorely miss.

—Bob Carleton

When I wrote to Joe last March asking about his sense of the history of ISPI’s move away from evidence-based practice, he sent back a very insightful note that does not meet your requirement of a couple of lines. But at the end of the note, he offered a classic JH insight that is worth remembering: “In my experience after scores of projects we performed the CEO is almost never correct about the cause(s) of human performance problems. The problemees [people who are experiencing the problem] almost always are correct, but it is rare they are ever asked.”

—Dick Clark
Joe Harless was one of the founding fathers for analysis as well as for translating the ISD ADDIE abstract phases into specific prescriptions for practitioners. He was high in energy and generous in spirit. As a junior practitioner (many years ago), he took the time to read my first *P&E* article and to write me a complimentary note about it! His knowledge passed down through books and workshops, as well as his commitment to many practitioners, leaves a lasting legacy.

—Ruth Clark

Around about 1980 in a basement conference room at NSPI, I happened to stumble into an after-session conversation Joe was engaged in. It turned into a two-hour series of observations, humor, and erudite insight that was the single most coherent summary of the history and practice of HPT I have encountered in my career.

—Bill Coscarelli

I first met Joe in 1988, early in my career as a consultant. His deep insight into the performance of people in work settings, combined with his expertise in developing tools to equip others to improve that performance, was without peer. While that is important, what mattered most to me was his willingness to be both friend and mentor. He radicalized my thinking about optimizing the performance of people and the organizations they serve.

—Paul Elliott

Joe said many times that as a consultant (internal or external) you shouldn't ask your client what he wanted people to know. Why not? “Because he'll *tell* you,” Joe said. “And usually that means they should know the history of widgets, and great moments in widget-making, and appreciation of widgets, and all that stuff. Instead, you should ask, ‘What do you want people to *do*?’” This to me was the heart of performance improvement; the rest is commentary.

—Dave Ferguson

My first real introduction to Joe came at the ISPI conference banquet where he delivered his incomparable Wizard speech. I was enchanted and presumed Joe to be far out of my league. When I later found myself on ISPI’s Ethics Committee with Stephanie Jackson, George Geis, and Joe, I discovered that Joe was indeed brilliant, and also practical, charming, irreverent, and a delight to work with.

—Carol Haig

Joe Harless taught me two things: first, that any time spent in analysis-before-action is (almost) never wasted; and second, that if you create the right environment, people will (almost) develop themselves. He created that environment for me, as an employee of Harless Performance Guild in its early days, by filling an admittedly small office with bright, interesting, collaborative people and by regularly throwing me into situations where I was over my head—while appearing to have complete confidence that I'd be able to handle them. It was a marvelous work experience; I am grateful and I will miss him.

—Stephanie Jackson

Joe was the role model for creativity, competence, and getting measurable results. He is already missed.

—Roger Kaufman

When I first came into ISPI (NSPI), Joe Harless was one of the top gurus who I had felt was larger than life and therefore somewhat unapproachable. Then, we ended up training in the same hotel in Atlanta. We met in the bar after work and he regaled me with stories of his life and HPT. He was down to earth, funny, and as warm a human being as I have ever had the privilege to meet. He exemplified all the best that our profession has to offer.

—Miki Lane

In my life I’ve had three significant epiphanies—one personal, one spiritual, and the third, a profound professional insight, came most recently from my friend Joe Harless. He was the guy, who along with Claude Lineberry, I laughed the most with at those annual ISPI conferences; we were like giddy kids going up and down hotel elevators, punching all those buttons. He was the guy I talked to when I needed clarification on my profession; he was the guy who wanted me to run his business many years ago. When the word “colleague” is used, I think of Joe. I imagine he and Butch (Lineberry) making the afterlife a very interesting (high performance–high laughter) place.

—Danny Langdon

I learned so many things from Joe. But the most important thing I learned was that my youngest daughter’s teachers were wrong when they labeled her “learning disabled.” As a third grader earning Ds and Fs in school for three years, she responded enthusiastically to Joe’s self-instructional module, “Road to Outer Skinneria” (earning a perfect score on the final practice of a difficult and complex set of 12 discriminations) with, “Dad, why don’t they teach like this in school?”

—Tony Moore
Joe's legacy is far more than an ounce of analysis, and tons of good common sense. His passion for positively impacting early education gave thousands of young people a greater opportunity to achieve their potential. I will smile when I recall his typically candid comment at ISPI’s 50th Anniversary gala opening, “Sister Margo, what do we do, other than mill around looking for a place to pee?”

—Margo Murray

What I learned from Joe (and from Claude Lineberry, who was with Joe at the Harless Performance Guild) is the importance of “front-end” analysis. Joe's booklet An Ounce of Analysis (is Worth a Pound of Objectives) made the point that the best-stated objectives are useless if they are the wrong ones and an equal waste if you shouldn't be doing training in the first place.

—Fred Nickols

Quality counts in all worthy efforts—quality of life; quality of friendships; quality of performance improvement interventions; quality of food and drink; and, of course, the quality of Alabama football. We can still hear Joe: “Roll, Tide, Roll!”

—Ann Parkman and Seth Liebler

When I learned Joe would be at the ISPI Annual Conference in Toronto this past April, I decided to go primarily just to see him. Of course, Joe was swarmed much of the time, and I was wondering when I would be able to chat with him. One day I was sitting at a table during a break and Joe came up behind me and bumped my arm. “Hey, Bubba,” he said, and I had my opportunity to chat with him for a while. It reminded me of my first couple of years in ISPI back in the ‘70s. I introduced myself to Joe at a couple of different conferences. When I did it at a third conference, he mock-punched my shoulder and said, “Hell, Rich, I know who you are.” He was a real hero to me, and will continue to be one. I am still trying to incorporate his lessons of humility, humor, kindness, and plain speaking in my life.

—Rich Pearlstein

I’m so very sorry to hear about Joe Harless’s passing away. It was premature, and he was still contributing to society right to the end. I’m glad he accomplished his dream of writing a fiction novel that then got bought up for movie rights! Amazing. He was an inspiration to us all, and so practical that everyone could profit from his ABCD method and “front-end analysis” ideas, plus many more, of course. To have contributed so much to local, elementary schools is, to me, his greatest achievement. He recognized the need to get to young people before they got out of school and made a possible mess of their lives. Long live Joe and all his lessons for all of us.

—Elaine Rand

Of all that I learned “sitting at the feet of master Joe Harless,” what was the most key? I learned to be a professional with a defined process that, when followed, gave effective results. I learned to distinguish between the data and analysis—and reporting both to a client in a way that could be used. I also learned to distinguish between different causes of performance problems and between different types of learning problems—and to avoid putting the solution cart before the causal horse. Most memorable of all was the experience of being part of a high-performing team at the top of its profession.

—Lindsay Robinson

Not too many people can lay claim to being part of a group of professionals who founded an entire discipline, but Joe was one of them. With Gilbert, Rummler, and others, he defined human performance technology for future generations of practitioners. But beyond his contributions to HPT, Joe went on to apply his proven approaches to improving public education, likely his most noble endeavor, and one I know he was most proud of.

—Marc Rosenberg

So, we’ll miss Joe Harless, not only for his contributions to the world of performance improvement, both in the industry, business, and military arenas and in children’s education, but for the exchange of ideas shared at the convention bars…and his love of a good scam.

—Bob Mager
Joe Harless was the highlight of my first ISPI conference. I attended his session and circled around the fringe of his orbit for two days. Why Joe? I liked what he talked about, and I liked how he said it. He was rather the opposite of the academic world I lived in. Joe's messages were direct, swift, dramatic, purposeful, and urgent. He was boldly idiosyncratic. He judged himself by his ability to be useful. Joe also made a difference at my second ISPI conference. I think it was in Washington, DC. I was scheduled in the very last slot, in a small room. I was happy because two of the approximately 25 seats were occupied by my parents. A third was very well filled by Joe. Imagine, Joe Harless had come to my session. I can't remember what I spoke about, but I do remember what he said afterward. It was sweet and positive. As for the details, that's between me and Joe. I'm happy to have it to rehearse in my mind, as I'm missing him. Friends we shared in the Coast Guard pointed to his approach and mine, noting his books and programs, and mine, and considering which ones to rely on. I think they might have approved if I had been inclined to duke it out a bit. But that didn't happen. I saw so much sense in what Joe had to offer and focused on the commonalities in our approaches to job aids and performance analysis. Joe wrote a book called *An Ounce of Analysis (is Worth a Pound of Objectives)*. That says it all. He said it all, and he said it well.

—Allison Rossett

Of the many things I learned from Joe, included are:

(1) “Make the user happy and the client a hero.”

(2) “There are no absolute rights or wrongs, only consensus.”

And, of course, (3) “Prime, prompt, and perform.”

—David M. Schiff

As an instructional systems technology student, I attended an ISPI session Joe gave on performance. I was blown away. He changed my entire career orientation...and my life. Through the years, he often teased me that he was my parent as he supported and fostered my development. No tease. How right he was. How painful this loss.

—Harold Stolovitch

I had the pleasure of being a member of the NSPI Board of Directors when Joe Harless was the President. I learned a lot by listening to Joe and watching him in action. He took our technology seriously and everything else lightly.

—Sivasailam Thiagarajan (Thiagi)

From the early days, Joe Harless was a savvy improver of performance, pushing our early theories into workable ideas while admonishing “you guys talk funny!” So as the practical academic whose PhD was an afterthought, Joe talked straight and accomplished much for so many. Sadly, he left us too early.

—Phil Tiemann

I recall Joe Harless on the stage at an NSPI (now ISPI) Conference so many years ago—decades actually. He was complaining about how some in attendance—and in general—were offering advice to others about saying “no” to clients’ requests for training. He said something to the effect of, “And when your client asks you for help in developing some training, do not, repeat, do not say [in a whiny voice], ‘Are you sure it’s a training problem?!’” Instead say, ‘Yes, I can help you—and I can help you even more if we can do a little analysis first!” RIP, brother Joe.

—Guy Wallace

I was just a young thing then. I was a practicing instructional designer who had learned my craft from those who took a weeklong course from the University of Michigan’s Center for Programmed Learning for Business—not a great way to learn. In order to go to an NSPI conference, my boss, Frank Wydra (whose obituary we have also written much too soon) insisted we be active in the local chapter and either write an article or make a presentation. Shaking in my boots, I chose the latter. I had been troubled by the insistence of some that task analysis had to be developed in the form of an algorithm. I like algorithms…but found that they were limiting when analyzing supervisory skills. My presentation laid out an argument against algorithmic analysis of managerial and people-focused skills. Shaking in those self-same boots, I started my presentation. The audience was not impressed. “But wait...,” they said. “Oh, no...,” they argued. “You just have to...,” they began. Sweating profusely, watching my entire career die in front of my eyes, I paused to ready a reply. Joe Harless, analyzer extraordinaire, piped up. “Slow down, folks,” he said. “She has a point.” With his few, well-chosen words, we turned the potential disaster into a facilitated discussion of different challenges in front-end analysis. And we were all better for it. Thank you and good-bye, Joe.

—Kathleen Whiteside
On behalf of all of the contributors to this memoriam for Joe Harless, here and elsewhere, thank you, brother Joe! Thank you for all that you shared with us, directly and indirectly, professionally and personally, before now and after. We promise to continue to pay it forward, sharing with others as you taught us.

### Links to Five Videos on YouTube of Joe Harless

**Joe Harless and Friends at ISPI 2012 in Toronto**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLjS9rkRvps&feature=plcp

**HPT Practitioner Series Video Podcast 2009**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRbz2csfmwI&feature=plcp

**HPT Legacy Series Video Podcast 2009**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=02gkvX5-NV4&feature=plcp

**HPT Practitioner Series Video Podcast 2008**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dxgKv–RBk&feature=plcp

**Joe Harless “The Wizard of Newnan” NSPI 1993 Banquet Speech**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeOZ9oJCR1k&feature=plcp