

Making Sense

by Steven L. Sowell, Head, Business/SPEA Information Commons

Like most, I find it difficult to write about myself. In a moment of weakness (and perhaps a little intoxicated by their flattery), the editors hooked me into sharing my experiences over the last several years. I believe that they hope my story will be, at least, entertaining and, perhaps at best, a universal tale of personal discovery. If these words fail to achieve one or both of these goals, the fault is totally mine.

In the fall of 2004, after 23 years with the IU Libraries (and 28 as a librarian), I left to take a position as Associate Director of Habitat for Humanity of Monroe County. Now, three years later, I am back, serving as Head, Business/SPEA Information Commons. How did these changes come about? What have I learned from them?

Like many who came of age in the sixties, I have a deep sense of idealism that surfaces now and then to cause havoc in my life. In the spring of 2001, I worked alongside many other volunteers from Habitat for Humanity to build a house with a family from Rwanda. The husband and wife, both warm and gentle individuals, had suffered terribly during the genocide that took place in their native country. I found the whole experience - the physical labor, the learning of new skills, the camaraderie of the group, the sense of accomplishment, and, especially, the satisfaction of helping a family in need of simple, decent housing - very rewarding. I was immediately enthralled. I signed on to be a volunteer crew leader, working most Saturdays. In this role, I led a small group of volunteers in the completion of the day's assigned tasks, ranging from framing, roofing, or siding to hanging drywall, painting, or planting grass. Very few of these construction skills I possessed prior to my involvement as a volunteer.

While I was having these great, fulfilling experiences each Saturday, my career as a librarian seemed to be at a dead end. Although my strengths had brought me some challenging experiences filling temporary assignments (Interim Associate Dean and Director of Technical Services and Interim Administrative Head, Music Library) and leading groups (Strategic Planning Steering Committee Co-Chair and Coordinator of Campus Libraries), they had not led to a more advanced position at IU or elsewhere. After 23 years as a branch library head, I felt stuck. It was at this point that I learned of a newly created position, Associate Director, at Habitat for Humanity of Monroe County. After much discussion with my wife and a great deal of anxiety, I applied for the position and was quickly hired.

As Associate Director, I managed the daily operations of the affiliate including personnel and IT. I supervised and coordinated the work of four full time staff who were responsible for selecting and preparing families for home ownership; recruiting, training, and supervising construction and office volunteers (over 1,000 per year); building homes on a twelve week schedule; managing sales of used and/or surplus building materials; and managing the office. While I was the Associate Director, the affiliate built 22 homes in partnership with families in need. We also renovated the Campbell House on Kirkwood Avenue to house the office. Although the work was extremely rewarding, after about two and half years I was exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally. In short, I burned out.

Fortunately, I had not burned my bridges when I left IU. I contacted some of my former colleagues and made it known that I wanted to return to a career in libraries. I began applying for appropriate positions in Indiana and the Pacific Northwest where my daughter lives. After a short while, I was contacted about the possibility of taking on another branch library at IU, the Business/SPEA Library, and leading its transformation into an information commons. I enthusiastically accepted this exciting opportunity.

That now brings me to what I have learned. Among the many lessons I have collected from my experiences, I will focus on three. Firstly, I have learned that I possess many skills that are not unique to librarianship that I can use in different venues. Having been focused for nearly three decades on the ins and outs of libraries, I forget that our world is not that different from most others. In any career, good communication, organization, and short- and long-range planning skills are key assets. We all have transferrable abilities that allow us to succeed in any number of work environments if only we take the risk.

Next, I have always loved to learn. Whether it is a formal course, an educational television program, or a good book, I enjoy the discovery of the new. Because of the quantity of interesting things I have studied, read, viewed, heard, and retained that have turned out to be useful in some situation, I am now a firm believer in Pasteur's idea that "chance favors the prepared mind." This font of seemingly useless information, coupled with a discipline to think through possible contingencies, came in handy numerous times when I work for Habitat for Humanity. Before and now, it helps me provide good reference service.

Recently, I came across a quote from Alan Kay that summarizes my final lesson: "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." As individuals and organizations, we have the capacity to choose our own course. There may be rough patches and detours along the way, but if we focus steadily on what we hope to achieve, we can do amazing things.

In the end, it is all about what we do for others. Whether we assemble automobiles, catalog books, or build houses, directly or indirectly, we do it for others. We feed them, shelter them, and help them make sense of the world.