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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

June 1st, 2011

June ASO Magazine Column

The Minimum is No Longer Enough

I was never what would be called a great student in school. My school counselors were troubled with what they saw as a student who could have done better but instead did just what had to be done to be a B/C student. With the clarity of age and hindsight, I now see that they were right. I never enjoyed school and I did do just what I had to do to pass, but with two very notable exceptions.

The first was in grade school. Science was something that came easy for me in grade school. It was my best subject. Then in 7th and 8th grade I met Mr. Jirjis and the grades dropped. His personality, his snide remarks, his demand of his excellence and your (the students) shortcomings came across as wrong. I was not the only student to have issues with Mr. Jirjis. He was highly regarded as one of the most complained about teachers on the staff.

It came to a head in 8th grade. Every year the 8th grade students of Mr. Jirjis class did a molecule display throughout the school made from Styrofoam balls and sticks. Mr. Jirjis assigned the molecules for each student. When it came to me, we had been having yet another discussion concerning my shortcomings in his class when he issued the challenge. "I was not good enough for his class."

In return, I asked him to assign me the most complex molecule for the display. For all of my years at that school, I had loved to look at the different molecule displays. I did not understand them at the time, but I wanted to understand them and better yet, make my own for all to see. This was the one event I was looking forward to in 8th grade science. It was the thing I wanted to do in Mr. Jirjis's class.

Needless to say, he accepted my challenge and assigned me a molecule, as he stated in front of the whole class to add further pressure, that was above the class level and I would not be able to finish. Not only did I finish my display, even Mr. Jirjis noted it as the best in the class and as such gave me a score that was much higher than the rest and helped push my grade in his class to a level to pass his class.

Looking back, as is the habit all too often in life, I realize today I could have and should have done better in Mr. Jirjis's class. I also believe the harassment and the meaning of a public challenge was because he knew I could do better.

The second case in point was High School. Science scores went up as soon as I left Mr. Jirjis and I was allowed to manage the High School Greenhouse. Yes, you can say it, Geek. But for the rest of my studies, mediocracy was the rule. That and the common phrase "we know he can do better if he wanted to". The exception was Social Science. I loved every subject. Geography, History, Political Science; A+, A+, A+! When I graduated, my school counselor noted that I was the only student he knew who had taken every Social Science Course available.

The Constitution Test, please, highest scores possible on the first try of each section of the test. My teacher, who later became dean of the high school, pointed out that I was the first of his students to do this. The Geography Test of recognizing the states, far too easy, as was the state capital quiz.

I was so pushy to take Social Science classes that I forced my way into an Advanced World Civilizations Class my Junior year. The class was restricted to Senior Class students, only those on the honor roll, and was as a bonus a college level credit course. Now being the only Junior Year student and beyond that the only B/C student, not honor roll, this was the course I failed at but is also the one that I still love and remember fondly today. The important lesson I have taken away from that class as I have grown older is that just because you fail in trying something above the norm, you can still succeed and learn a valuable lesson. Sometimes failure of a goal with worthy reasoning, doing something different and yes possible failing rather than accepting the current standards, is a success in the long run.

Looking back today, in my mid-thirty's, I wish I could go back and do better. Without that ability to go back in time, all we can do is look back and learn from our mistakes, take note of our shortcomings and try in the future to avoid similar downfalls. That brings us to today.

Three years ago I ran for the Tazewell County Board with one of my campaign goals to increase the communication between government and the citizens to lead to better transparency of the governmental process. Immediately after being elected, I took my campaign goal to task. I released a website that I paid for (no public funds have ever been used) that posted for the public to see all of the information I was being given as an elected official that was not always available to them with only a few exceptions.

Now, let's clarify: If they would drive down to the County Board Office and ask for the information, then yes it was available to them. But if you did not ask, if you did not even know we had the information, then that's your fault for not taking the time to ask for it. Or at least that was what they said. That was not what I called "open transparent government."

What about the Official County Website you ask? Upgrading it to include this information had been a talking point for the past several years, but it still sat embarrassingly behind the times and no one was really pushing for it to change.

Immediately after introducing my website the firestorm from a few began. How stupid it was that a County Board Member would have his own site. How dare I criticize the current site? Do citizens really want that kind of information; they have never asked for it. And my favorite was: Currently we met the requirements of being transparent.

What was the result of this County Member Website? Well the Official Tazewell County Website got an immediate facelift. A lot was promised as far as more documents and information being made available to the public and the facelift to the Official Tazewell County Board Website did help. But sadly, my website is still the only site for many of the public documents concerning the Tazewell County Board and the Official Tazewell County Board Website is still behind other counties our size (and many smaller than us) as far as what is available to the public. Progress has been made, but we can do better.

Another step towards this campaign goal has been each year since I have been elected I have taken the time to visit with each of the Municipality and Township Elected Officials. I have the honor to represent two cities, five villages and seven townships. I schedule a time to attend their meeting, announce the dates and times so that the other six District Three County Board Members can attend if they wish, and simply ask these Municipality and Township Leaders what can I do to better represent the citizens of Tazewell County? Immediately questions were raised by some, many of same that questioned the Municipality and Township Tour. Why should we go to their meetings? If they want to talk to us, they should be coming to our meeting? Can anything really be gained by this?

The results have been better than I could have hoped for. Several highly noteworthy projects have resulted from these meetings, including several million dollars in road projects throughout the district. This event has grown from just myself and one other County Board Member participating the first year to four of the seven County Board Members participating the second year. This year, County Board Member Russ Crawford asked if he could lead the Municipality and Township Tour and under his leadership we have six of the seven County Board Members participating.

Some have criticized this Municipality and Township Tour as simply not necessary. For those few that make that statement, they are correct; it is not necessary.

What it is is going above and beyond. We do not need to do this. We do not need to improve public participation. We do not need to improve transparency of government. We do not need to reach out and look for new ideas. We do not need to improve how we run government today as long as the citizens keep electing us. We do not need to do better as long as no-one upsets the apple cart and as long as everyone goes along with the pack and is a "Team Player".

The problem for me at this time; I am not that student in school who was then happy with mediocracy. I am not that student who was happy to do just the bare minimum to pass and move on. I demand better of myself and worse yet, I now love politics and love working for the public and see the potential good that can come from a little extra hard work.

I will not sit by and lower my standards to do just what has to be done. If lowering my personal demands for high achievement, if settling for what has been done in the past rather than daring to question and improve, if continuing to preach for what should be done rather than doing the hard work to make it happen is what it takes to be a "Team Player" than count me out. I have done all of this before and now understand why we must do and demand for more from our elected officials. And I have a feeling the citizens of Tazewell County and beyond feel the same way. The politics of doing the "status quo", the bare minimum and hoping no-one notices are over because I dare to shake up the apple cart. And I know that I am not alone.

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