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The Rungs of Learning with Maury Forman, Educator and Economic Development Changemaker

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Maury and I met several years ago while working the same shift at Northwest Harvest's SODO Community Market.

We always exchanged general pleasantries but it wasn't until this last year that I came to understand his incredible 34 year career with the Washington State Department of Commerce, not to mention our shared experience of being published authors.

In this month's Rungs of Learning interview, I asked Maury the questions and he penned the responses, revealing his love for learning, storytelling and positively impacting those around him.

When you read this, I'm sure you'll learn a thing or two, be inspired and even laugh out loud like I did. Enjoy!

What attracted you to the field of economic development?

Actually, I was not attracted to economic development. I had spent 18 years in the healthcare profession in a variety of positions from a Medicaid Investigator for Fraud and Abuse for the federal government to a Quality Assurance Specialist at Group Health to a Clinic Manager for Specialty Care at Pacific Medical Center. When PMC downsized, I found myself a laid off casualty. So, I entered the profession the way many others probably did. I was unemployed and applied for as many open positions that I could. Fortunately, I received an interview for an education and training manager for economic development and convinced the committee that even though I did not have a background or experience in the field, I could bring something new to the job. It also helped that I had produced a patient education program and guide for Hansen's Disease (leprosy) which was one of my clinics and shared that with the committee to seal the deal.

How did you get interested in economic development in rural areas?

When I created the education and training program in Washington, I discovered that most of the attendees were from rural areas and did not have the money to travel out of state to attend and network at conferences and workshops like their urban counterparts. Rural practitioners in Oregon also lacked knowledge, tools and resources and I worked with the staff from Business Oregon to create a comprehensive education and training program that focused on rural initiatives. Before long we had attendees attending from the entire Northwest including British Columbia.

Economic development is considered a profession that is very competitive between communities and states. But the teams from Oregon and Washington decided that education should not be a competition and we could all be successful in achieving our economic development goals if we shared the right tools, and knowledge.

We loved working with rural communities. They are creative, open to new ideas, less bureaucratic, and engage in stimulating conversations as to their vision of their community. It's unfortunate that they are often overlooked when it comes to providing resources and funding because even though 3/4th of the United States is considered rural, only 14% of the population lives there. As a result, they have higher unemployment, a less diversified economy and are less resilient when it comes to major economic conditions such as the pandemic or other disaster related conditions.

Oddly enough, the pandemic has created a revival in many communities by becoming zoomtowns. People are discovering that they can work remotely and relocating to areas that are safer, with less crowded schools, more affordable housing, closer to nature and even family in many cases.

How did your formal education prepare you for this career?

The best thing that was learned from my formal education was learning how to write. Unfortunately, it wasn't until graduate school where I learned how to compose my thoughts in a succinct and concise message.

The other skill that I learned while I was in school was public speaking. My dream in high school and throughout college was to be an actor and eventually move into stand-up comedy. After being on the road and even starting a theater with other college graduates in the 1970's, I discovered that I was not funny and could not act. Those were essential skills to succeed in achieving my dream. But I did learn how to give a speech and that became essential in providing education and training through my books and presentations. I also learned that economic developers have a lower bar for comedy than people attending comedy clubs.

What did school NOT teach you that you learned on the job or from others?

Economic development is really a relatively new profession. Even though the creation of wealth in a community among areas has been around forever, the profession only began in the 50's and 60's. When I was in school, there were no majors in economic development; No one went to school and learned how to recruit a business, no one went to school and learned how to conduct business retention interviews: No one went to school and learned how to write a community strategic plan. However, there were English literature classes that taught you how to write the great American novel, that great piece of fiction you always dreamed of. That was like writing a community strategic plan.

So to prepare myself for this career (which at the time I did not consider a career but a pit stop till I found something better) I attended national conferences sponsored by the International Economic Development Council. It was there that I networked with people who were smarter than I was and convinced them to come to Washington to teach best practices and strategies to practitioners in the Northwest.

The pandemic has caused every profession, even economic development, to look at itself and pivot to be more prepared, diversified, and successful. Educators should take the opportunity to look at their outcomes. Education is not just about scholarship. It's about successful adulthood.

Take a good look at the kids coming out of your schools. They will probably form the backbone of your community for the next 50 years. If they are hardworking and smart, teach them skills, and introduce them to be creative and entrepreneurial, your community is likely to grow and prosper. But if your schools have high dropout rates and low-test scores, and you don't teach them to be creative and the opportunities of an entrepreneur, then your community will never grow. If we want to improve your business and entrepreneurial climate, we can start by improving our education

climate.

You've been an educator much of your life. How has being a teacher contributed to your own learning and growth?

Since I am not an economic developer, I am dependent on learning from those people that practice in the field. I then take that knowledge and combine it with humor and creativity in the classroom. So rather than teaching a class and calling it The Basics of Economic Development, which is pretty boring sounding, I create a game show from what I learned. So, my classes turn into participatory game shows like Economic Development Jeopardy, or How to be an Economic Developer. To teach communities how to recruit a business I conduct the Economic Development Dating Game or the Economic Development Match Game. They are all parodies of existing game shows that are fun and educational. We have even created exams at the end of each class in the form of crossword puzzles. So not only have I learned about economic development, I have also refined my skills as a standup game show host. (Still waiting for Jeopardy producers to call)

What were/are some of the valuable lessons you've learned from starting up three businesses?

One of the businesses I started was Cartoon Inc. We curated cartoon art shows for schools, museums, and art galleries. I have always loved cartoons and thought they were great teaching tools. Cartoons could teach people about art, history, politics, journalism, and array of other skills. Probably the biggest lesson I learned from this business was its hard combine your hobby into a profession. Not everyone is willing to love your passion as you do and pay for it. Soon I began to care more about making money and lost my passion for the art and appreciation of a cartoon.

To consider if you have what it takes to be an entrepreneur, ask yourself these questions:

- Do your friends and family think you have a good idea?
- Do strangers think you have a good idea?
- Will strangers pay money for your idea?
- Will strangers tell their friends about your great idea?

However, if your friends and family don't think it's a good idea, I would not let that discourage you. After all, if Mrs. Fields had listened to her first husband when he said that a cookie store is a bad idea and that Americans like crispy cookies, not soft and chewy cookies, then my cookie jar would be empty right now. Your friends and family may be your best critics and their comments and suggestions can help improve your idea. But I am sure that Mrs. Fields is glad she did ditched her ex and moved on with a different husband and a different cookie.

One other lesson learned from my startups. People believe a comedienne's success is meteoric. It's like Nyquil, the moonshine of medicine, fast acting and long lasting. After all we are in an electronic age where everything takes place quickly. That could not be any further from the truth.

Even if you answer yes to those four questions, sudden success will still take years and maybe even decades. Behind every successful standup or start up are years of hard work and developing a routine or product.

In your spare time, you are also a blogger and have written several books. What resources/people did you leverage (if applicable) to help you develop your writing skills?

I was very fortunate to meet some very smart people who gave great presentations. But just because you give a great presentation, you can't necessarily turn them into a book. That gave me the opportunity to have co-authors who knew

about economic development and were able to share great ideas with other practitioners while I added my knowledge, storytelling skills and humor to the publication.

Storytelling, the oldest form of communication, is an essential skill no matter what profession you are practicing. The marketing and communications director for the Dept of Commerce is a brilliant storyteller about Washington the way he weaves data with stories. I learned a great deal from him. Unfortunately, storytelling is a lost art in many parts of educational system. One of the nonprofits I volunteer with is the Bureau of Fearless Ideas in Seattle. They work with some schools and teach kids how to write stories. By the end of the day, the kids get an individualized book about the story they created that also includes their illustrations. Whether you are an entrepreneur seeking money or a public servant testifying in the legislature, storytelling can be a cash cow. Data and spreadsheets are pretty, but storytelling seals the deal.

My cartoon company also allowed me to work with numerous popular syndicated cartoonists who included original cartoons for the books we wrote. Every book that my co-authors and I wrote about economic development included cartoons to make people laugh and to think about the profession they are in. I often think that if it were not for the cartoons, I would be just another academic writing for tenure.

Writing for me does not come naturally. Some people can do that. I labor over practically every word. My hope is that readers did not have to labor as hard to finish my books as I had to do to write it.

What advice would you give others who would like to pursue a career in public service/government?

I always tell people that there are three types of people in the world. Those that make things happen, those that watch things happen, and those that wonder what the hell is happening. Public service allows you to make things happen. For me public service allowed me to meet new people, brainstorm new ideas, become creative, introduce new programs, enjoy stimulating conversations, go outside my comfort zone, retain my sense of humor, and make difference in people's lives. I would encourage people to do the same.

You can learn more about Maury, his books and his cartoons at <http://mauryforum.com/>.