Aging Lifestyles: School board may prove to be an education

by Joe_Volz

So, you are looking for a new career now that you have retired. A new beginning. Something markedly different.

How about running for public office?

I am not talking about some backbreaking endeavor that will take a million hours a week and massive fundraising. You don't have to run for the state legislature or Congress or for governor.

How about a local office?

Something like the school board.

Well, I have convinced myself. When I saw a column in the local paper, the Frederick (Md.) News-Post, last November lamenting that absolutely no one had signed up to run for any of three seats on the county board of education, I decided to run. Since then, 11 other candidates have entered the race. I will let you know how it turns out.

As a retiree, I don't need to work. I have a nice pension. But it is time to give back, not only to our rural county 50 miles northwest of Washington but to all the friends, parents and teachers who helped me obtain my education. Surely, this new job, if I win, will take some effort but what in life that is worthwhile doesn't? I intend to spend virtually full-time at the job, if that is what it requires. The school board has twice-a-month all-day meetings that last eight hours. And there are various committee meetings and budget sessions with the county board of commissioners. The reports to study will fill up my study. And there are a number of community meetings to find out what is on the minds of the populace.

But I am fortunate to be among the many retirees who have invested wisely and I don't need to worry about earning the big bucks anymore. Considering the hours involved, I estimate that my annual $10,000 salary will average out at an hourly wage lower than I could make at the Starbucks coffee shop down the street. But many of us are not in it for the money. For the first time in our lives, we can devote a lot of hours to public service.

I look at it this way: It is time for me to pay back all those devoted people who had helped me get an education - not only my parents, but hundreds of other parents who sold hot dogs, for example, at football games to raise scholarship money for me and other students. And there were so many inspirational teachers at

all levels - Miss Cummins, my beautiful second grade teacher, who was my first love and was so gentle even when she reminded me that it was not appropriate to dip Nancy Lakamp's pigtails in an inkwell.

And I remember Mr. Farley, my eighth grade social studies teacher, who fueled my lifelong interest in journalism by assigning me to the task of designing a medieval period newspaper.

And I will never forget the tall and imposing Miss Nichols, with her lusty British accent who made literature come alive in her high school classroom. So, now it is my turn to help.

As a newspaperman for almost half a century, I have sat atop the mountain looking down at public officials and taking potshots at them. It has been much easier, I suppose, being an observer than a participant.

Now, I am trying to be part of the solution, working with other board members and yes, suffering the same slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, as Miss Nichols would have put it, from my former colleagues in the press corps.

We will know in a few weeks whether or not the voters see me as the kind of candidate they want for the school board. The seven members of our nonpartisan board are hardly household words. They do not aspire for higher office. They don't put out press releases trumpeting their achievement. Nor do they spend big bucks to campaign.

Yet, they have significant fiscal responsibilities. The annual school budget they supervise is approaching half a billion dollars. That's right, half a billion. The school board runs the largest restaurant system in the county and the biggest transportation system, administering to 44,000 students.

I think I am ready for the task. I have taught nights on the college level for the last 20 years and I have reported on every aspect of government from the school board to the White House, becoming a Pulitzer Prize finalist for coverage of Pentagon spending. In fact, I have combed budgets, as a reporter, from every level from school boards to the White House.

It will be up to the voters to decide if they want my help. I'll let you now what happens.

E-mail Joe Volz or write to 2528 Five Shillings Road, Frederick, MD 21701.

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