

Life as a Local Government Manager: It's Who We Are

by **Claire Collins**

Life as a local government manager is often referred to as “living in a fishbowl” or, as a diverse group of managers suggested during a local government conference held at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, in November 2006, it is said that the life of a manager is unique. That uniqueness was the foundation for four Virginia local government managers, including this author, to highlight the everyday reality of life for a manager. This article is a snapshot of each of us on the conference panel and it explains why we do what we do.

If all of us had been told at the age of 18 that we would be local government managers, we would have been surprised and in all likelihood would not have known what a local government manager is or does. Now we know firsthand, and we share our knowledge with university and college students and faculty as we did in Richmond in the hope that the local government management profession will be considered both valuable and fun.

MY CONCISE STORY

For me, public service has been a mission that started at the young age of five. I observed the years of tireless and dedicated service of my father, who served with the U.S. military. I also observed my mother volunteering her time in every community we lived throughout the United States and overseas to do her part to help in the betterment of people. My parents, who were my role models, instilled in me the desire to work hard, to give to others, to not forget where a person comes from, to set high-quality goals, and to treat others how you want to be treated.

As a young adult, I worked in the private sector but always kept a close watch on and an interest in government and law, which resulted in my master's degree in public administration from VCU. I began my local government career in 1988 and quickly realized it was my calling and mission to put people first and build networks and relationships for creating and helping build a sense of community, no matter where the community is located.

I served as the first public affairs officer of Henrico County, Virginia. At the time, I did not realize the impact of my work on the community, but when I attended a legislative meeting in the Virginia General Assembly building late one night in Richmond and testified in front of animal activists about how stray dogs are handled by animal control, I quickly learned about the strong opinions of animal rights supporters.

I found a mentor in Bill LaVecchia, who was Henrico county manager and who always had his door open to me and to all county employees. He touched base with employees as often as possible and believed that, although citizens are number one, it is extremely important to cultivate good relationships with employees. He also liked staff members to learn "his ways." His ways included promoting the professional growth of staff so they received as much professional training as possible to better themselves and their community. I served as an assistant with him until his retirement.

After Henrico, I was appointed the first female and second county administrator to serve Bath County, Virginia. During my 14-year tenure in Bath, I recognized that government is best which governs not at all. In the small county with a population of approximately 5,000, I found that the most gratifying work as a local government manager came from working with and for the community in a fair and equitable manner.

My first four years were challenging and tumultuous, calming down

later to allow for the shared community vision and capital projects to be funded and completed. I passed my torch there in April 2006 to become city manager of Covington, Virginia.

During 20 years as a local government manager, I have kept my family close and keep smiling no matter what happens. The support network and faith I have and continue to cultivate keeps my local government management flame alive for me.

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STORIES OF THREE

Many managers who are consummate professionals have their own special "I'm a manager because" stories. Here are the stories of three who participated in the conference session.

The city manager of Lynchburg, Virginia, L. Kimball Payne III, known as "Kim," is a well-respected and talented Virginia local government manager. His military background led him to work in government, and he served nearly eight years of active duty as a naval flight officer with his last assignment as a naval ROTC instructor at the University of Virginia. He is a retired commander in the Naval Reserve.

His quiet and sincere nature have served him well in his local government career, which began in February 1984. Methodical in thinking and always seeking the most innovative and team-based approach to service delivery for the community he serves, Kim finds his rewards in his family and serving the city where he grew up. Before he served in Lynchburg, he was the assistant county administrator of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, where he later was appointed and served as county administrator for 14 years.

His longevity and vision are noted in Spotsylvania County today.

He has the ability to see beyond the current and plan for the future. He learned this while studying for master's degrees in planning and public administration at the University of Virginia. An avid Cavaliers fan, he is often spotted cheering at University of Virginia sporting events or watching the Richmond Braves play baseball. His affinity for team sports crosses over into his management style and how he deals with employees and, above all, in how he relates to his spouse and five children.

His advice to young professionals and students considering which career path to choose is to follow your instincts and go talk to local government managers and people who work in government to obtain their perspectives on why they do what they do. For Kim, he does it for the love of community.

He, too, has had mentors in past managers, especially in Sonny Culverhouse, often called "the father of Lynchburg." Putting music and entertainment into your work and life is one of the many ideas that Sonny passed on to Kim, as well as all the deep, dark secrets of the who, what, where, when, and how of goings on and people in Lynchburg.

Kim reassures all that being you and having fun is part of having a good life as a local government manager.

J. Randall Wheeler, county administrator of Spotsylvania County, Virginia, followed in Kim Payne's footsteps. Randy now holds a position that Kim previously held. He started his local government career in Fauquier County, Virginia, following the receipt of a master's degree in public administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His first position in Fauquier was director of the office of management and budget.

Later, he was appointed assistant county administrator and deputy county administrator until his appointment as county administrator. Randy has moved up the ranks in

Spotsylvania and is a prime example of a young career-minded professional who knows what he wants and has worked diligently toward his professional and community goals.

Once rural Spotsylvania County has become a suburb of Fredericksburg and, as such, has encountered many planning and development issues involving the need for negotiation and compromise among stakeholder groups. Randy's subtle and friendly attitude disarms critics and allows for honest and frank discussions and negotiations when solutions need to be found.

With a spouse and young children, he is constantly juggling in order to both spend time with them and devote himself to his local government management profession. His youth and ability to get along with total strangers has made it easy for him to be a manager.

As with most managers, however, he has encountered setbacks and disappointments on the job during his management career. Despite the down times, he perseveres because he believes in his community and the life that he has. His best advice is to keep your cool, analyze situations, and be prepared for the unexpected.

A true mover and shaker is Town Manager Marc Verniel of Blacksburg, Virginia. Young and full of energy, Marc is a stellar example of why a young professional would consider a career in local government and particularly in local government management. He began his career in local government after completing his master's degree in urban and regional planning at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

As a comprehensive planner, he was responsible for restructuring and rewriting Blacksburg's comprehensive plan and the town's zoning and subdivision ordinances; his success at those tasks led to his appointment to assistant town manager. Marc spearheaded the creation of an economic development strategic plan and a downtown master plan, facilitated improvements to the town's operating and capital improvement program processes, and

led the creation of the town's technology department.

Marc is known for establishing positive and proactive relationships with administrators at Virginia Tech, the business community, and civic and nonprofit organizations for the benefit of enhancing the Blacksburg community. In August 2005, he was appointed town manager.

His planning background has made Marc able to apply time management

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skills as he serves as a director on numerous boards in the Blacksburg area and also coaches soccer, which his children play.

He also has experienced firsthand the bad times that sometimes come with a management job. He was involved in and had to deal with the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech tragedy. His leadership behind the scenes in handling the devastation to this community during the tragedy was superb and has made him a well-respected manager in Virginia.

WHAT OUR LIVES AS LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS MEAN

Mentors are important in our lives, and their support is there for us in both the tough and the good times. Families and especially children are important to fill the void that careers do not fill. Faith and fortitude are important in our desire to do good for humanity.

If we had to do it all over again, all of us would repeat what we have done thus far. I speak for the other

managers who served with me on the VCU panel by saying that we are fulfilling lifelong dreams and missions as we go about being local government managers. It is our goal of helping communities come together to create and re-create themselves that keeps us whole.

Even as we deal with situations that are disappointing and frustrating, we think of the freedoms that we have in the United States and what democracy means. Even as we deal with disagreements and adverse situations, in the end they define who and what we are. Local government managers take the initiative to do better for all citizens.

We do not mind living in that fishbowl or being called unique. We still make time for a personal life with our partners, perform work for betterment of the community, and have fun working with people. It's just this simple: Local government management is where we want to be. **PM**

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**Coming in
May
PM
Don't Let
The Fishbowl
Water You
Down**