

President's column

By Tim Houle, MCMA President, Administrator, Crow Wing County

The legacy you wish to leave

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can." —John Wesley, Founder of Methodism

Maybe I'm a dreamer. Some would surely say that I am. I want to look back at the end of my career and know—not think, know—that I made a significant positive difference in the shared life of my community.

It stems from this Judeo-Christian tradition that I was endowed by my creator with certain gifts—talents and abilities—and I am asked to use them to advance the greater good. And so it is from this perspective that I consider myself so richly blessed to be able to spend my career in a way that I believe gives me that very opportunity every day.

Conventional wisdom, however, might suggest that working in government means that we can't possibly succeed, that we can't possibly overcome all the obstacles to success, that we can't seriously consider our work to be of value. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that government workers are lazy, that they are just here for the paycheck, that they are not driven to succeed.

Most (but, of course, not all) of the government workers I've known throughout my 20+-year career in public service have bristled at all of these notions. So, how are we to square our personal mission with the assumed environmental limitations on success?

"The path is not smooth. Rather, it is strewn with rocks. It'll take longer than you expected—it always does. You will probably encounter exaggerated expectations. There will always be carping skeptics who doubt you and your effort. It is all too easy to put off tackling the difficult new activities. And you will likely be less than perfect in empowering your people to use your vision. These

are real obstacles. Steel yourself mentally. You can confront the obstacles and win." —from Teaching the Elephant to Dance, by James A. Belasco

The answer, at least for me, is to reject the assumption.

What exactly is it that prevents us from creating government organizations that are highly responsive to the people we serve? That doesn't mean everyone gets everything they want, but why can't it mean that we are courteous and professional, that we respond in a timely fashion, that we are as helpful as we can be, and that information we provide is useful and accurate?

What exactly is it that prevents us from creating government organizations that understand that we are here to fulfill a specific mission—a public value proposition—and that it is reasonable for people to ask how well we achieved it? That doesn't mean we can control everything that impacts on the achievement of the mission, but if we can't move the needle, then isn't it fair to ask why the public would invest in trying to do so? We never have exerted control—anyone with a teenager understands that—but we do exert influence and that influence should move the needle—if it doesn't, it's fair to question the investment.

What exactly is it that prevents us from creating high-performing, service-focused, outcomes-driven public organizations that can clearly demonstrate the difference they make in the shared life of our communities? The answer, it seems, is everything and nothing. Clearly, it would be easier not to lean in. Clearly, if it were easy, everyone would do it. Clearly, the obstacles are real—shouldn't we do it anyway?

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For me in my practice, this is about what legacy I choose to leave. At the end of my career, I intend to be able to honestly look myself in the mirror and say, "You made the best use of the talents with which you were blessed and, in so doing, you made a big difference." In my final column, in humble gratitude for allowing me to serve, I leave you with the same quote I gave you last spring at our conference at which I became the temporary head custodian of this august association.

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."

—Theodore Roosevelt, Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910 ◻

In memory

George DeLay was the first city manager in Robbinsdale—appointed in 1965 when the form of city management changed to council-manager form. He had been city clerk for seven years prior to that. He was still city manager in 1976.

George DeLay was city manager when the current City Hall was built and was also instrumental in setting up the first tax increment financing districts with Project 4 and Scattered Site tax increment districts, which helped to finance Robbinsdale's major redevelopment efforts.

Obituary:

"DeLay, George E. age 98, of Faribault, MN, and former City Manager of Robbinsdale, MN, passed away Wed., Dec. 31, 2014. Funeral Services on Mon., Jan., 5, 2015 at 11:00 a.m. at the Cathedral of Our Merciful Saviour in Faribault, MN. Visitation will be at the Parker Kohl Funeral Home, 607 2nd Ave. NW, Faribault." ◻

MCMA Newsletter

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Your Senior Advisors are here to help!

Who's been to the MCMA Annual Conference more often than you?

By Kevin Frazell, MCMA Secretariat

Why that would be Helene Johnson, executive director of MN GTS, and impresario of the MCMA spring annual conference for the past 37 years. You read that right, 37! And that will be it!!! Helene is retiring at the end of July, so May 2015 will be her last MCMA conference. When I sat down with Helene recently for an interview about her years at GTS and working with MCMA, I asked her if she had ever missed the conference in those 37 years. Her response was, "Well, no, but I arrived a day late one year!" Amazing, Helene, simply amazing!!!

Helene's career with local government began in 1964 when she worked as a high school intern with the city clerk in Robbinsdale and served as secretary to the City Council. She recalls those as truly the years of "smoke-filled back room" deal making, complete with cigars. Helene didn't disclose if she smoked one.

After earning a degree in English at Carlton College, followed by a master's degree in adult continuing education at the University of Minnesota, Helene had a brief stint in the hospitality industry at the Radisson Minneapolis, then went to work in the conferences department of the YWCA St. Paul.

An administrative fellowship at the U's Continuing Education Department morphed into a position with the newly formed Government Training Service (GTS), a joint powers effort by the League of Minnesota Cities, Association of Minnesota Counties, Minnesota School Board's Association, U of M, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU), the regional development commissions, and the state departments of Planning and Employee Relations. After a brief stint in a support role, Helene rose to the top of the organization in just one short year, being named executive director in 1977, a position she has held ever since. In 2004 Helene led GTS out of its joint powers framework and into independent nonprofit status.

Despite the many, many professional associations, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations she has worked with over those years, Helene admits that the Minnesota City/County Management Association (MCMA) and its members will be "the hardest to leave." But with a slight smirk, she admitted it has also been one of the most challenging groups to satisfy. Imagine that; hmmm, Helene, what's that about? Yes, yes, so OK, as you say, we have high expectations and strong opinions. But in her usual gracious style, Helene offered how much admiration she has for the work that local government managers do, often with little recognition. She also expressed appreciation for how helpful the

MCMA annual conference has been for her own leadership development.

Asked about her strongest memories of those 37 years, Helene went immediately to the cut-throat athletic competition of the earlier years—tennis, golf, table tennis, and volleyball—all played as if the outcome really mattered. In more recent years, some of that competition has been replaced by more relaxed and friendly competitions like bowling.

Some of the more memorable educational programs include Thor Dahl on time management, Joel Barker on the Implications Wheel, Paul Light on organizational leadership, and evening speakers Arne Carlson and Dick Beardsley, who left everyone inspired. Remembrance of a less successful program was the year clinical therapists from the Menninger Institute asked everyone to turn to the other people at their table to share the deepest, darkest fears and secrets of their souls. MCMA members simply looked on aghast and refused to participate!

So what's the next chapter in the life of Helene Johnson? Well, at the risk of sounding like a cliché, she admitted that she's going to Disney World. Helene, in an earlier iteration of life, was part of the singing group Up With People. They're having a huge reunion in Orlando in late July. After that it will be community service, travel, and continuing to parent growing and adult children with her partner of 11 ½ years, Scott Hansen. Helene's son, Blake, was married just this past year.

Helene recounts the many, many manager and assistant friends she has made over the 37 years, including those like Bill Bassett and Wally Wysopal, who have served on the GTS Board of Directors. If you're on Facebook, watch out; Helene will be sending you a friend request!

Helene, to say "thank you" or "thanks for a job extremely well done" is less than adequate to describe how we all feel about you or what you have achieved during your career. The outstanding conferences you have planned for the past 37 years have contributed irreplaceably to the quality of administrative leadership enjoyed by Minnesota cities and counties. But equally important and appreciated has been your presence, warmth, and personal friendship. To say that we will miss you, is, well, words just can't even begin to do it justice. The 2015 Annual Conference will be a bitter-sweet one for all of us. Take care, good friend. You'll always have a place in our hearts. And a seat at the conference should you ever want to pay a visit. Heck, we'll even comp you the registration fee! ☺

Appointments and other professional news

- **Mike Funk**, former city administrator, Minnetrista, has been appointed assistant city manager/director of human resources, Maplewood.
- **Chelsea Peterson**, community development coordinator, Falcon Heights, has been appointed assistant city manager, Chanhassen.
- **Matt Jaunich**, county administrator, Sibley County, has been appointed city administrator, Hutchinson.
- **James Leiman** has been appointed city administrator, Ada.
- **Randy Lenth**, former city administrator, Kasson, is in transition.
- **Daniel Lenz**, management and budget analyst, Johnson County, Kansas, has been appointed city manager, Waseca.
- **Nate Matthews**, city administrator, Staples, has been appointed city administrator, Bemidji.
- **J. Thomas McCarty**, county administrator, Eau Claire County, Wisconsin, has been appointed city administrator, Stillwater.
- **Tom Nikunen**, finance director, Jordon, has been appointed city administrator there.
- **Steve Robinson**, public works director, Worthington, has been appointed city administrator there.
- **Charlene Stevens**, former city administrator, Willmar, is in transition.
- **Michelle Tesser**, former assistant to the city administrator, Falcon Heights, has been appointed city clerk and HRA director, Landfall.
- **Sack Thongvanh**, assistant city manager, Albert Lea, has been appointed city administrator, Falcon Heights.
- **Pat Wussow**, city administrator, Brainerd, has announced his retirement for this summer.
- **Dean Zuleger**, former city administrator, Lake Elmo, is in transition. ○

Board meetings recap

By Kevin Frazell, MCMA Secretariat

The MCMA Board of Directors met on Feb. 12 and April 17. Highlights of those meetings included:

- Approving re-establishment of the local government internship stipend program; three stipends of up to \$3,500 each will be awarded to three local governments willing to match the amount in creating an intern position.
- Meeting with ICMA Midwest Director David Limardi to review our state affiliate agreement. MCMA and ICMA have cooperated in a mutual member recruitment campaign that has resulted in four members joining or rejoining ICMA, one of the best records in the Midwest.
- Reviewing the use of the MCMA listserv. It was determined that the listserv continues to be an effective way to keep members updated on timely MCMA news, and also allows members to connect with one another. The Board directed, however, that members be reminded that with over 250 participants receiving any email sent out on the listserv, caution and appropriateness should always be observed.
- Interviewing five retired members who are interested in being appointed as an MCMA/ICMA Sr. Advisor (formerly Range Rider). It is expected that at least two will likely be appointed in the near future, joining Bob Thistle and Bill Bassett. ○

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Memorandum from the edge

By Jon Hohenstein, Community Development Director, Eagan

Wedding season is here or, more precisely, wedding invitation season. When you attend a wedding, the couple probably will have a favorite relative or nervous friend get up to do one or more readings. If the wedding is in the Christian tradition, one of the readings will almost certainly be from Chapter 13 of First Corinthians, where the author describes what love is (patient, kind, trusting, hopeful, unflinching, etc.) and what it is not (envious, prideful, self-seeking, resentful, etc.). The reading ends by saying three things remain—faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I am all for that and, at a time when one or both of the bridal couple is asking the inevitable question—What am I doing here?—it's a useful reminder. Every time I hear this, though, it seems to me that Chapter 14 should pick up where Chapter 13 leaves off. Okay, so that's love, let's hear some more about faith and hope. Seeing as how they are the place and show bets in a three horse race, they deserve more than a little attention.

Well, guess what. Chapter 14 shifts gears entirely and delves into the relative merits of prophecy and speaking in tongues. I am not saying those things are not important, but I have relatively few occasions to prophesy or speak in tongues. On the other hand, anyone engaged in the public sector relies heavily on faith and hope. They are the currency and lifeblood of democracy.

Having a working acquaintance with the terms is useful in other ways. Not long ago, one of my granddaughters and I were reading a book together, and she came to the word "faith." She thought about it for a moment and then she asked what faith means. Recognizing a teachable moment and mining my Lutheran confirmation synaptic connections for just the right explanation, I said that faith is knowing something for certain that we cannot prove. She took in this bit of information, smiled, and said, "OK, so it's like when my sister took my cookie when I was in the other room. I can't prove it, but I have faith she did it." In that moment, it occurred to me the definitions of faith and suspicion are closer than I had realized before.

I regrouped and tried again. I explained that was close, but usually faith has to do with good things we believe, like knowing that people we love who have passed away are in heaven, rather than blaming people for things we can't explain. Besides, I had to admit that I was the one who had taken the cookie. I was hungry and it was just sitting there without anybody's name on it. How was I supposed to know?

It is important to have faith in good things. It is equally important to be able to hope. I remember a minister friend talking about life changes saying a person's capacity for hope is the necessary counterbalance to the disappointments that occur in every life. He said that no matter how much we think we understand that life has its ups and downs, we still go through the feelings and sensations of loss during the downs. Even when we know dreams are dreams, it still has an effect when we realize some of them won't come true. Or as we age, that the time when they might have come true has passed.

He said the death of a dream can lead someone toward depression, but it doesn't need to if they are able to focus on the dreams that remain, find new dreams, or support the dreams of others. It could be easy to give up and become hopeless, but you don't need to.

I thought about this while watching *The Theory of Everything*, the story of the life of Stephen Hawking. Despite the severe effects of a supposedly terminal disease on his body and his independence, Dr. Hawking not only survives, but continues to find ways to communicate, to do research, and to thrive. At one level the story is about a unified theory of physics and the universe, but at another it is about an overarching theory of life and living. Especially at the point in the film when he says, "There should be no boundaries to human endeavor. We are all different. However bad life may seem, there is always something you can do, and succeed at. While there's life, there is hope." With faith and love, hope remains. ◻

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check out
MCMA's
website:**

www.mncma.org