

Meeting the community face to face

by BROCK WEIR

Students this week are starting the year with a fresh slate.

That's not to say the accomplishments of the last year have been for naught; rather you're at a brand-new starting block ready for the year ahead, a time that will hopefully give you the tools to keep up with our rapidly changing world and to take advantage of opportunities that often come fast and furious, and could profoundly impact the course of your future.

Co-op programs, for instance, can open one's eyes to career possibilities that otherwise wouldn't be a blip on their radar. Maybe a class trip to the nation's capital might kindle some embers that could result in a newfound interest in governance, political science, or simply serving the public. Elsewhere, although granted this is more of a summer thing, a trip to a summer camp up north, could sow the seeds for a future environmentalist, climate change specialist, park ranger, or even a vet.

It's always fun to see how local students fared at the end of the year.

If a newspaper editor is lucky, top scoring students in the closest school board, might just live in an area you cover and you get to share their story beyond school walls. If you're even luckier, they might just share a few tips of success that not only benefit the community but you can take to heart as well.

The same goes for students who end their years on a particularly high note, having some grants or scholarships to show for it, whether they're recognized for their academic prowess or their community contributions. Those who are recognized for their community work are, in my experience, particularly fascinating and lessons can always be drawn on what fuels their passions, propels them forward, and the impact they want to have on the world around them.

Those are the questions that are particularly fun to ask, and sometimes those of us in this position get to be on the flipside as well.

Students are also beginning the year either at the cusp of reaching further goalposts or are nearing the finishing line in June excited for all the possibilities ahead. Some of those who are considering careers in journalism, communications, or information-sharing at its broadest, often reach out for the inside scoop of what this career offers, armed with a litany of questions that are pointed in the best possible way.

Many of these questions are opportunities to accentuate the positive, of which there are many, I hasten to add; in other instances, it is clear they've done their homework as to some of the less positive elements; but, as they could be the journalists of tomorrow, you want to keep things real with them, even if your answers can sometimes be a reality check for some more romanticized ideas.

The important thing, however, is they have the questions and are seeking out answers.

Sometimes that can be a rare commodity these days. Well, in more recent days.

Prior to the global pandemic, one generally assumed such questions were being asked in good faith. Questions would often range from a simple, "Why did you get into journalism?" and my answer touching upon a simple love of telling someone's story would often resonate with the person asking the question as it was more or less what brought them to the interest in the first place.

Another fun question to field is whether or not something I've written has made anyone mad.

While the answer to that is often in the eye of the beholder, when I tell them the most hate mail I've received so far was related to a story I wrote about a labour dispute as a high school student for another local paper, they're either relieved or disappointed.

There is occasionally, however, a different tone to the questions in the post-pandemic world.

This past spring, I had two requests from people who wanted to talk about what it means to be a journalist in today's day and age.

Both seemed to be on the up-and-up, reaching out due to a genuine interest, but one took a different track altogether.

In addition to asking perfectly standard questions, those that I've come to expect, this particular inquisitor took the time to answer the questions on my behalf as well, the tone becoming increasingly strange as the email progressed. In the process of their filling in the blanks, I learned that apparently the reason why I write is to satisfy the whims of some vague international organization, who they were certain signed my paycheques, and how I was both simultaneously *'woke'* and *'asleep'* at the same time.

It was an enlightening read for me, but I still feel it would have been an even more enlightening read for them had I been given the opportunity to answer. That not being the case, however, I felt my efforts to do so would have been wasted and simply continued on with my day.

That being said, I do wonder what the motivation for such *'questions'* are.

Obviously, it's because in some way they think they're scoring some kind of point, political or otherwise, but are we now at point in this era of echo chambers where questions are coming with an expectation of the *'desired'* answers to preserve preconceived notions? Or maybe over the course of the pandemic we've become more averse to real human exchanges, a lingering mindset that those face-to-face interactions are best avoided wherever possible, or otherwise kept to a minimum?

Prior to the pandemic, I once had the honour of being invited by the local library to participate in a one-off *'Human Library'* event.

Hosted in conjunction with Culture Days, a Province-wide initiative that gets communities working together to showcase their cultural resources in fun and engaging ways, I was amongst the *'Human Books'* that community patrons could *'check out'* for a half-hour or so where they could have all their burning questions answered by their captive audience.

Among my fellow *'books'* were a famed gardener, a jewellery designer-to-the-stars, a duo of Grammy Award-winning music producers, an author-turned-social justice advocate *'esteemed company for someone who only had two years of being editor under his belt, but it was a richly rewarding experience.*

While it was a chance to answer questions, the process got each of us to think about what brought us there in the first place through someone else's lens, and hopefully differences were made both ways, however small they might seem.

Libraries today are about far more than books.

They are community hubs where we can learn, grow, and stay connected. Heck, they are even places now where you can check out a fishing rod if an impromptu camping opportunity comes your way. The possibilities are endless *'and something like the Human Library, in whatever format it might be, should be explored again.*

Everyone has questions they want answered, but finding the right way *'or even the wherewithal to do it'* can sometimes be a challenge.

If we're simply out of practice, let's all do some warm-up exercises together.