

Life Transitions:Alaskan Choices I Made

Description

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The luxurious Egan Library at the University of Alaska Southeast was completed while I lived in Juneau. This branch of the UA System has the best ***School of Education*** but many districts prefer to hire newly trained Outside teachers seeking their Alaska Adventure. This UA branch is also referred to derisively as the ***Auke Lake Country Club and Community College***.

The question I asked myself before deciding to become a certified Alaska teacher: *What if I could help people who could not tolerate the public education system? Could I be the kind of teacher to young Alaskans so many others might have been to me?*

There comes a time in every person's life when one must decide if where they are going is leading to where they want to be. Perhaps you have sought opportunities that are not now fulfilling. Do you dare change direction?

For me the question arose while I was living in Juneau. I had already enjoyed a couple of interesting career moves from my original home in Anchorage.

I had been living a couple of years in the various harbors of the Juneau/Douglas area on my sailboat, working for non-profit corporations promoting Alaska Public Education to lawmakers. Life was streaming by. During the workweek I did paperwork and interacted with various people to promote public education causes. On the weekends I enjoyed a **Jimmy Buffett, *Pirate Looks at 40*** lifestyle, often sailing around the area.



But what did I really want to DO with my life? Many people face this challenge at some point.

As a youth I had generally disdained my teachers in high school, with a few exceptions. I had regarded the entire public school system as 19th century learning factories. Now my job duties required singing praises to public education for those who funded it. As a student I had done only as well as I needed to do to keep the adults who always told me I could do better off my back. Now I wondered if others like me might benefit from my insights.

Only 75% of Alaskan kids who start school in kindergarten manage to graduate. I have heard teachers declare in an Alaska school teacher lounge that she could tell whether a kid was likely to graduate as early as Second Grade. The 19th Century Factory Model of education instills low expectation mediocrity.

I was also attracted to the classroom because of my own experience. Parents of young Alaskans who hate their school might consider some of the realities I have faced.

I had managed to gain a bachelor's degree—and the former Chancellor of the *University of Alaska, Anchorage* had recruited me to be his legislative aide. **Dr. John Lindauer** had brought me to Juneau in 1983 as legislative staff during the **13th Session**.

After that gig ended it occurred to me: *What if I could help people who needed more than the public education system could provide? Could I be the kind of teacher to young Alaskans so many others might have been for me?*

To become a teacher required a new tack; I needed to pull the tiller in a new direction and quickly adjust the sails. It meant finding the prevailing winds going back to school.

I was no stranger to the *University of Alaska, Juneau* as it was called then. I had taken a class in photography specifically so I could use their darkroom to process images I had taken for my legislator boss. While I had previously made my living with my cameras, the class was a bust for me and I took an F for lack of participation. That bad grade haunted me when I needed a good grade-point average to gain Alaska certification as a Type A teacher.

Lesson learned

So, I took classes I thought would help me be the kind of teacher who could be successful in rural Alaska. I had attended public school in a village and understood what might be required to be successful. In addition to the courses required to gain certification I took classes in small engine repair, marine tech, and woodworking. Computer technology was a coming trend so I pursued a Master's Degree with emphasis in teaching with technology. In those classes we learned how to teach students to use Apple IIe computers and program in BASIC.

I earned my master's degree in Education in 1989 and did everything but the student teaching requirement to be certified as a secondary teacher. I was scheduled to begin student teaching when life threw me another curve: **I fell in love, and got married February 14, 1990.**



Sen. **Arliss Sturgulewski** married Donn and Cathy Liston in her Capital office February 14, 1990.

This created a barrier to reaching my goal of becoming a teacher; only a fool quits a good-paying job to do free student teaching for half a year on a new marriage. I first had to learn how to share my life with another person.

I looked at my life differently now

Aspiring to be a teacher meant attempting to make my interactions *instructional*. Over the years this is a style I have adopted over previous inclination toward confrontation.



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Meanwhile, my wife Cathy's career in banking soared. When the time came, I revisited the idea of becoming a teacher, and she supported me in taking coursework required to teach K-8. I finished student teaching with host teacher, **Todd Wicks'** fifth grade class, at **Riverbend Elementary** in Juneau, to become certified in 2003.

The most important thing I had to know was how to manage a classroom.

I was 52 years old. My newly certified peers in the profession—mostly from someplace else—were half my age. I became the most requested substitute teacher in the **Juneau School District** and I loved teaching middle-school. That was the developmental stage in my own life when I had faced the most challenges. I'm still connected to some of those former kids through social media!

**But now it was Cathy's turn to shift gears.
She was fed up with Juneau and told me we were moving to Anchorage!**

As a teacher my options were different. I was now on a career path and I was qualified for a range of jobs. Public education in Alaska employs some 8,500 teachers and my first full-year teaching contract was to be another great adventure.

But another curve-ball; a life-threatening heart attack at the end of 2003 disabled Cathy, but she didn't qualify for Social Security disability insurance until 2006. I was applying for full time teaching jobs which would come with benefits. In the meantime, I was substitute teaching in the **Anchorage School District** and tutoring at **Sylvan Learning Systems**. Cathy managed our financial resources while we were making mortgage payments on two

houses—our Juneau home and our new home in Anchorage.

One teacher application required interviewing over the telephone, answering questions from what on my end sounded like it could have been the entire community of Haines on the other end of the line. They interviewed 23 candidates for the job of teaching sixth grade. When the interview ended I told Cathy: “That was fun but I don’t believe they will be calling me back.”

But they did call back! The superintendent Charlie Jones said I was the first choice of the community but there was a hitch—I had to be there and ready to teach in 11 days!

We were living in a 3600 ft. home in College Village. I didn’t see how we could do that, but Cathy said we could! Movers packed a 42-ft moving van that later filled four single-car garage storage units in Haines. We drove 777 miles from the **Costco** gas station in Anchorage to the first gas station at the Haines “Y”.

Lessons in classroom management I had learned from Mr. Wicks saved me in my first year as a teacher and I learned a lot about how public education really works in Alaska, too. This is the front line in traditional public education and the school we were working in was about to be replaced by a new \$14 million building that nobody I talked to had voted for building.

After spending the 2006-07 school year in Haines, Cathy’s doctors insisted that we remain closer to a full hospital for her health issues.

Upon returning to Anchorage I pursued my original intent in becoming a teacher—to teach those who have given up on the public education system—so I might help them be successful in a career.

This is what I had set out to do and it had taken me where I wanted to be. I spent nine years doing that in Mt. View and Wasilla. It was satisfying work and many of my former students are now enjoying success they too were longing for.

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