2003

People Profile: Edwin Merwin

Editor
Edwin O. Merwin, Jr.

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Name: Edwin O. Merwin, Jr.
Born & Lived: Born in Charlotte, NC. Lived in Westchester, NY, and later in northern New Jersey, before returning to my “southern roots” in July, 1983; when I moved to my present residence of Denmark, SC.

Family: I have a mother (Florence Merwin) and sister (Deborah Merwin) presently living on Fripp Island, SC. I also have a sister (Harriet DiChiara) who lives with her husband (Fred), in Ivyland, PA.

Professional Career and Activities: I am presently employed as Assistant Librarian/Assistant Professor by the University of South Carolina Salkehatchie, where I manage the Peden McLeod Library, located in Walterboro, SC.

I am a member of:
- The American Library Association
- South Carolina Library Association
- Sigma Tau Delta

In addition to my article on “Stress...” I have written an article “Retention of Student Assistants In a Small Academic Library” and “Research Libraries and the USA Patriot Act.”

On October 25, 2002, I participated in a presentation entitled “Peer-to-Peer ILL with Illiad,” given at the SCLA/SELA 2002 Joint Conference in Charleston, SC.

Within the University system, I am presently a member of the Regional Campuses Faculty Senate. I also publish a weekly campus newsletter (Salk Talk) in both electronic and paper format.

My Spare Time: In my spare time I enjoy tennis, beach combing, reading, and singing in the Bamberg Co. Choral, of which I am a founding member.

Favorite Books: I enjoy reading mystery books by such authors as Dorothy Gilman, Laura Childs, Lilian Jackson Braun, Mickey Spillane, and Wilkie Collins. I have also very much enjoyed the various “Mitford” books by Jan Karon.

Philosophy: The words of my late father (Edwin O. Merwin) guide me in many situations: “Don’t fight the problem.”

How/Where do I see the industry in five years: Contrary to the view of some of my colleagues, I do not anticipate the demise of “hard copy” books, journals, etc. Paper, especially acid-free paper, will be with us for a long time to come. In terms of research (high school, college, professional/scholarly) I see expanded use of information in electronic format. This is especially true of reference materials, where viewing the Oxford English Dictionary on a PC screen is much less cumbersome than sitting with a volume at a table. In the area of science and medicine, because information in these areas is almost obsolete when it is published, I see paper journals and books being totally replaced with electronic sources; this is more the exception, than the rule. I say again, paper will not go away; just look into any professor’s office!

Not surprisingly, those selecting the last choice, (based on the “Comments...” section that followed) gave music as the principle source of stress relief.

Earlier I mentioned that some people actually thrive on various levels of stress. Now let me introduce another concept, that of people who do not like the stress associated with their jobs, but still feel that in a certain sense they are helped by it. For example, the people who wake in the morning knowing they must face another day of “demanding patrons,” indecisive or domineering supervisors, and possibly a longer than usual day because of possible staff shortages, recognize that this is the price they must pay so that monetary expenses outside the job can be met. To state this more succinctly, the morning riser knows that if he/she doesn’t show up for work, the job will cease.

Based on the preceding survey, all libraries should not only recognize that job-related stress exists in all positions, to varying degrees, but that efforts should be made to reduce stress buildup. The working atmosphere will be more pleasurable and productive if the overall level of stress is monitored, and when necessary, addressed. Furthermore, there is a correlation between unrelied stress and “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment,” or in other words burnout (Maslach, et al 97). This latter, more serious stage can lead to high staff turnover rates and significant lowering of morale. Some suggestions follow:

- Encourage both management and staff to take advantage of short breaks once or twice a day, and try to avoid “talking shop” during these temporary departures from the front lines.
- Hold staff meetings periodically (possibly once a month) to give employees a forum to discuss, in addition to the usual library business, matters of procedure, work load, or “problem patrons.”
- Occasionally compliment an employee for a particular contribution, or just for doing a consistently good job each day. Don’t assume that they are only doing what they were hired to do.
- Supervisors should see that library policies and procedures are revisited periodically. Make sure each employee knows what is expected of him/her, especially new employees. Unfortunately, the nature of such individual orientation plans is that current staff members provide information (usually much more than can be absorbed) that they think the new person will need, and the new person, who can’t yet know what is actually needed, doesn’t know how to sort out the truly useful from the not so useful (Caputo 91).
- Let us also consider when planning and implementing procedures and policies for novice staff that newly hired student assistants are remembered. There is no doubt that individual attention and concern can create a successful employment experience on campus, thus discouraging the high rate of turnover affecting this critical employee group (McCabe 89).
- For 46% of survey respondents, prayer, or some alternative form of spirituality, can reduce stress levels. “Even the earliest recorded religious works suggest that a union with a higher power is not possible unless all distractions, all physical activity, all worldly things, and all thoughts are eliminated so that a higher level of consciousness can be obtained: This is the relaxation response in a spiritual form (Benson, 1975).