

COLUMN: As The Saws Turn

TITLE: The Long Journey Begins

The third week of May was a very special week in the life of my son. He finished his first year in high school on the exact day that he turned sixteen. You might not think these two events are related, but indeed they are. You see, he must achieve a 3.0 grade point average (on a 4 point scale) in order to have the privilege of obtaining his driver's license. I did say *privilege*. I believe a driver's license is a privilege that you earn, not a right you are born with.

Tying the grades to the license just seemed to make sense. Prove that you have the responsibility to work for good grades and you earn the privilege of getting a driver's license. Mind you, he has been driving under a learners permit for almost a year. He and I have had many hours behind the wheel. I say he *and I* because there have been numerous occasions where I really wanted that brake pedal on my side of the car. But so far, he's done pretty well. He's even mastered the stick on the little pick-up.

This is a huge deal to him. It's not just about driving – and that is enough to get him fired up – but it's about the freedom that is associated with being able to drive on your own. It's a big step in our lives as parents as well. We now get to wander around the house in a mental fog, wondering if he's OK until he gets home.

It's also a huge deal because it now means he must find employment to support this driving privilege. Until just the last few weeks I don't think he equated filling a 20-gallon fuel tank with \$2.25/gallon gas to the actual cash in his wallet. That was a real reality check. This will be his first 'real' job, other than mowing lawns and washing cars and watching the neighbor's homes while they're gone. It is

the start of a lifetime of work, of numerous jobs in numerous industries, of (most likely) several careers. The long journey begins.

It is an interesting trip back in time to review the trail I took from the time I was his age until I landed in this industry, and then to consider all the stops I made growing up in this business. Looking back on it, each stop added to the accumulation of experience; each stop allowed me to learn something – about working, about relationships in the workplace, about a specific industry or business. Each stop seemed to be just the experience I needed in order to be capable of doing what was required in the next stop.

I didn't set out at age 16 to be in the exhibit industry. But I worked in an amusement park and learned about lots of different kinds of people, and learned some of what the 'experience' meant. I didn't set out in college to be in the exhibit industry, either. But my education in architecture and marketing has certainly been a benefit, and I have definitely used those skills. I didn't even set out in my professional career to be in the exhibit industry. But my experience with two large corporations marketing departments was a valuable addition to a growing knowledge base that would be helpful here.

I got into this business when a marketing director asked me to help with trade shows. I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded like fun to me. Beats sitting at a desk writing technical brochures and annual reports, I thought. And you know what? It was! And it still is. After almost 25 years in this business I still get excited to get out on the show floor. I enjoy the planning, on both the marketing and architectural sides. I enjoy the set-up, where our industry really shines, where teams of people work long hours to get everything together. And I enjoy walking the show, seeing the results of all the hard work...our clients doing business with their clients and prospects.

So what was your journey like? Did you grow up in the business by virtue of your family being in it, or did you, like me, learn about it along your career path? Do you see where your background prepared you for this, or were you thrown into it like being thrown to the wolves? And what's your take on it now...are you going to stick it out 'cause there just isn't anything else you can do after trying this, or are you doing everything you can to get out of it as quickly as possible, 'cause we're all just a bunch of nut cases?

Because if you want out, I need someone to find me a bunch of old tires and mattresses. I have a driveway and garage to protect.

See you on the show floor.

Jim Obermeyer has been in the trade show industry over 20 years, both as a corporate trade show manager and exhibit house executive. He is now a partner in a trade show and event marketing firm: Reveal: Exhibiting a World of Difference. He can be reached at jobermeyer@revealexhibits.com.