

Sandy city manager's experiences speak volumes

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, July 6, 2006

Author: GOSIA WOZNIACKA, *The Oregonian*

SUMMARY: "Playing With Fire" | 'Weird calls' and small-city stories make their way into Scott Lazenby's quirky books

He collects the quirkiest stories.

There's the one about a resident going door-to-door in a new subdivision, trying to organize it as a sovereign nation. Or the one about someone calling the city of Sandy planning department to seek advice on birth control. Or another, about the guy who once nonchalantly asked police "If you're walking down the street with \$2,500 in your pocket and a cop stops you and finds out, you'll be cited. Correct?"

Scott Lazenby overhears these stories in meetings, on the streets, in cafes, or at Sandy City Hall, where he works as city manager. He jots them down on scraps of paper, or stores them in a "weird-calls" folder. He asks his colleagues around the country to do the same.

In May, the Florida City and County Management Association invited Lazenby to talk about his novel "Playing With Fire" at the association's 60th annual conference in Panama City Beach, Florida. The book offers a fast-paced ride through the "song and dance" of small city politics and personalities, and the resulting dramas that threaten to unravel a few lives.

Many Sandy residents don't know their city manager is a published author, nor do they know his unusual biography -- his wide travels, ambitious education, and myriad interests. Those who do know him say Lazenby is much more than a bureaucrat. The most common comment one hears about him around City Hall is, "We're so lucky to have Scott."

"Scott is very self-effacing. He doesn't take credit for the work he does," says Sandy Mayor Linda Malone.

Born in New Delhi, Lazenby lived on five continents --in four countries plus one colony (India, Algeria, the U.S., Switzerland and Hong Kong) --before graduating from high school. His father was a sales manager with Caterpillar, so the family moved frequently. Lazenby was bilingual (English-French) before age 3, only to forget it all and become bilingual again in middle school. He admits these days his French is pretty rusty.

He spent his high school years exploring the islands around Hong Kong, then a British colony, at the height of the Vietnam war, and later skydived and motorcycled for a year in Australia.

Lazenby went on to study physics at Reed College, but says he was always interested in urban planning and architecture. He received a master's degree in public management and policy from Carnegie Mellon University, another highly competitive school, and went on to work as city administrator in Vancouver and Glendale, Ariz.

For the past 14 years, Lazenby has worked as city manager in Sandy, a small town in the foothills of Mount Hood.

Why did he choose to settle in Sandy?

Lazenby says he's allowed to be creative. With the support of the Sandy mayor and the City Council, he has helped implement innovations.

"The things that attract city managers to other, bigger cities are already here," he says. "We have a sewer system, citywide internet, movies in the park, a transit system and our own urban growth boundary. There are plenty of challenges. Honestly, I can't see a better professional environment to be in. And I love living in this city." Besides, his wife's name is Sandy.

Still learning

Lazenby is now working on a Ph.D in public administration at Portland State University, delving into governance theory and political economy, and was recently accepted into PSU's community of scholars. He also serves as

president of the Oregon City-County Managers Association. He started a marimba band at his church, plays guitar in a garage rock band and makes furniture in his basement woodshop.

But ultimately, it's the strange stories that keep this renaissance man going.

"As an official, this city stuff can be pretty frustrating," he says. "But when you think of it from the human standpoint, it suddenly becomes interesting. From one hour to the next, you just don't know what problems you'll be working with."

Lazenby also may be one of the pioneers of a new genre --writing fiction about small city life from the perspective of a city administrator. A formula for pure boredom? Quite the contrary.

"Playing With Fire" takes place in Trillium, a non-existent suburb of Portland that's in the midst of phenomenal growth. It's based on Gresham and Lake Oswego. When voters award themselves a tax cut, the city tries to balance its budget by reorganizing the fire department. The proposal divides the community and nearly destroys the life and career of the fictional city manager. There are quirky stories and sizzling romance too, and it's all written in a swift style, making for entertaining and interesting reading.

Fiction as textbook

And while Lazenby is still a couple hundred thousand copies short of a best-seller, "Playing With Fire" is now used in college government courses. It also serves as inspiration to other small city writers, like Central Point administrator Phillip Messina, who rewrote his book "The Spanish-Speaking Dog" after consulting on his manuscript with the Sandy manager.

Lazenby bases his characters (especially the bad ones) on a combination of people he has met throughout his career, though some Sandy staffers say they recognize themselves in the novel. Not that they mind. "Scott's a writer, people know he's a writer," says Malone, the mayor. "You have to be careful what you say around people who are writers."

"Playing With Fire" captures some of the chaos and irrationality of small town political decisions.

"One of the book's conclusions is that communities have a right to do things that are not rational from an economic standpoint," Lazenby says. "So if you're trying to do everything on a cold cost-benefit basis, you can get very frustrated. People will say they want everything to be rational, based on science, efficient. But their choices are very different."

Lazenby is now shopping his two other novels, "The Prayer Chain," in which a garbled prayer chain causes disasters big and small, and "Deep Six," a sci-fi thriller about the future of genetic engineering. Lazenby can't help being prolific, so he's already at work on his fourth novel, "The Hunter," based in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest in Washington state.

He also plans to write another book about a city administrator's adventures.

"I want to do for city managers," he says, "what John Grisham does for lawyers."

Gosia Wozniacka: 503-294-5936; gosiawozniacka@news.oregonian.com

Edition: Sunrise

Section: Metro East Neighbors

Page: 01

Record Number: MERLIN_8209262

Copyright (c) 2006 Oregonian Publishing Co.