

Stewardship in Unexpected Places: A Personal Story

By David S. Bell

I find tremendous examples of stewardship and fundraising in all kinds of places. Recently, I encountered great stewards (and fundraisers, too) on a somewhat remote beach on a rainy Saturday morning. Here's the story.

I recently attended a conference sponsored by the Ecumenical Stewardship Center for North American stewardship and fundraising leaders. This conference is held annually at a Florida beach destination. It has been held the past two years in Marco Island. Fortunately, my family regularly accompanies me on this trip. I heard from another conference attendee that Tigertail Beach, located a few miles away from our conference hotel, was an excellent shelling area. We did not find time all week to drive to this beach. However, we had a few extra minutes on the morning of our departure. My daughter and I decided to visit this somewhat remote beach. We intended to go shelling for only a few minutes since rain clouds were looming. Plus, we needed to finish packing.

Upon our arrival, more people were at the beach than we anticipated. We soon discovered this particular Saturday morning was a scheduled beach clean-up time. We passed by several locals, but were stopped at the registration area for the clean-up event. Three local women were seated behind the registration table. They represented the Friends of Tigertail Beach, Inc., the non-profit organization hosting the clean-up efforts. The women asked if we were there to help. I knew that we only had a few minutes, so I mentioned that we were just visiting and leaving soon. They encouraged all the more. I told them that we would be on the lookout for debris, but we came mainly as tourists.

As we wandered the beach, our eyes gazed through the shallow waters, the squishy sand, and the mangrove edges searching primarily for shells and then for trash. We did find some shells, like the many we had seen on the beach near our hotel. Then, we found various items of trash. Honestly, as we walked longer, it was the trash, like a fabulous pair of jeweled sandals (or were those barnacle-covered flip-flops?), that captured more and more of our attention and imagination. How were these sandals lost? Who was wearing them? Where were they lost? Oh, the imaginative stories that a dad and his daughter can create! Beside the stories, we talked about environmental stewardship – caring for God's creation. It was a hands-on teaching moment that parents too often miss. I took full advantage. We placed the sandals along with other debris in someone else's garbage bag and headed back to the parking lot. It was time for us to depart.

As we walked back, I thought about these women. I knew that we would see them again. I could now walk by them with my guilt relieved. Yes, I was feeling slightly guilty for telling them earlier that we were just there to take from the beach as tourists, instead of give back. After spotting those sandals, we became more than tourists. We helped clean up the beach. We were . . . well, stewards. I could tell the women that we had done our part.

Sure enough, they were there! Despite the rain clouds, the women were still on the boardwalk. I mentioned to them that we had cleaned up the beach area where we had walked. They immediately thanked both of us. Actually, they politely thanked me and fussed over my daughter. My daughter signed the registration book at their request. The women inquisitively asked us a few questions. One woman, a Board member named Susan, rooted through a notebook and found a certificate of appreciation to present to my daughter. Then, another woman took our picture and told us it would be posted on their website. Sure enough, it is!

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In between this scurry of activity, each of them pitched their organization. They shared information about children's educational events, quarterly clean-up days, environmental conservation, the osprey nests, and on and on. Most of all, they shared their passion for this organization and their gratitude for us helping in a very small way to achieve a part of their larger mission. Before our final goodbye, I was handed a pink, two-sided pamphlet. It was a membership application to the Friends of Tigertail Beach, Inc. They asked me to become a member and to make a financial contribution.

I found an excuse – “But, we're just visiting!”

They were prepared – “It doesn't matter. Lots of out-of-towners have contributed. It's a good cause. Your gift, along with other contributions, will help save beaches for your daughter when she grows up and for many future generations. Think about it!”

I folded up the pink, two-sided pamphlet, shoved it in my short's pocket, and headed for the car with my daughter. She was full of smiles and carefully carried her certificate so it would not be bent or wet in the rain.

That certificate is now “on display” in her room with other certificates, pins, and trophies that she has been awarded over her few years of life. That pink, two-sided pamphlet is on my desk next to the computer as I type. Its edges are wrinkled. The crease marks from where I folded it are evident. It looks a little beach worn from being shoved in my pocket. But, it won't be on my desk for much longer. Why? It needs to go in the envelope along with my contribution to the Friends of Tigertail Beach, Inc. It was just a last minute decision to go on a short excursion to a beach tucked at the end of a dead end street. Yet, it's one of the most memorable experiences from attending a professional conference on fund development and stewardship!

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Here are some of the stewardship lessons:

- Stewardship happens primarily at the grassroots level
- Stewardship is about so much more than money
- People need to be invited to be a steward
- Being a steward is a gift
- Giving is a freeing experience
- Stewards encourage others to become stewards
- Stewardship is hard to teach, but easy to learn through a focused, hands-on life experience
- People like to give and to make a difference for others
- Stewardship is a lifestyle choice
- Great stewards are interspersed throughout all generations
- People seek opportunities to serve more than just themselves

Here are some of the fundraising lessons:

- Initial rejection from a potential donor may result in a positive outcome
- Personal gestures of thanks, no matter how minimal the gift, are critical
- Special recognition for first time contributors is essential
- The organization's mission needs to be clear and concise
- Board members' passion stimulates donors' generosity
- Everyone affiliated with the organization needs to know the case statement
- Donor cultivation requires taking the time to become well acquainted with major donors and potential donors, alike
- Giving is typically an emotional response
- Several persons other than the development staff are capable of cultivating donors and asking for contributions
- Accurate records are imperative to most funding efforts
- Written information should be given to potential donors for a deferred response
- Asking for a financial commitment is fundamental to receiving a financial gift

Granted, these lists certainly are not exhaustive for creating stewards or cultivating donors, especially in a faith-based context. However, faith-based organizations often operate out of such financial dysfunction or are so reluctant to develop a clear mission or ask for financial support that a lesson as practical as this life experience is a good one. These stewardship and fundraising lessons will serve most of our faith communities very well. I am reminded, and hopefully you are, too, of the important opportunities that we have to ask boldly for financial gifts and to embrace a life of generosity, hope, and passion.