

## **A Successful Career!**

Bookmobile Driver, Teacher, Architect

By Clay Parsons

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This is the story of one of my wife's college classmates. He was one of those people who almost effortlessly stood head and shoulders above everyone else. You know, those people we loved to hate when we were students. To say that "John" was talented was an understatement. He was an accomplished artist, a patient craftsman, and an ingenious problem solver, a combination of talents always sought but seldom found in architecture school students. He was also quiet, sensitive, and self-effacing which endeared him to his classmates.

When John graduated, in June of 1968, he moved to New England to apprentice with a well-known architectural firm. He quickly collided head on with the constraints of tradition, money, demanding clients and the frustrating politics of professional office work. Like other talented people before him, John was also an idealist and found compromise difficult, especially when it violated his beliefs of what architecture should be. He was also dismayed by the expedient corporate culture, which discouraged innovation and favored standard solutions. It didn't take long for him to conclude that corporate architecture was not for him.

Disillusioned with traditional practice, John returned to California. After a short stint with a local design firm, and a job as a journeyman carpenter building tract homes, he accepted a position teaching art in a small secondary school near his parent's home in the Sierra Nevada foothills. When the local school district's bookmobile program needed a part time driver he volunteered. The old bus, painted bright yellow and full of books and supplies was dubbed "The Yellow Submarine" by the students. He said that it took him awhile to master the book cataloging system and the bus kept breaking down. When he wasn't teaching or driving his bus he also designed private residences and gardens. About that time my wife and I lost track of John's doings as we pursued our separate careers in the Boston/Cambridge area. That was over thirty years ago!

Last summer we attended a reunion dinner for John and his classmates at the university where he had received his degree. About thirty people from his class attended. Everyone was asked to talk about his or her work and career. John spoke almost reverently about driving the old bookmobile through the Sierra Nevada Mountains and meeting with

students and teachers. He knew everyone on his route and told us stories about several colorful characters he had befriended. His easy smile spoke volumes about his love for his work. He also showed us several slides of energy efficient homes, which he had designed. One of them had even received a national award. Other people at the reunion showed colorful slides of office buildings, college campuses, commercial centers, large private homes and estates they had designed. Everyone tried hard to make a good impression. But somehow John, the part time architect, bookmobile driver and art teacher, stole the show, again. I suspect it was the joy in his presentation that won over the audience.

John's life story runs counter to the usual standards of personal success established by our culture. Did John have a "successful" career or did he just run away from his obligations as a professional? Did he ignore his potential? If you asked him about it he would most likely question the relevance of your question, and then ask you to define success. He may not have made very much money, but after you pay the bills, does that really matter? John enjoyed his work. He was obviously happy, which I cannot say for many professional people today. Maybe John knew something they didn't.

So what is the secret of a successful career? Obviously, we should not all go out and get jobs driving bookmobiles! John's solution was to reject some of the standard beliefs and practices of the architecture profession and do several things that made him happy, what we call a portfolio career. He also made it work in a practical sense. *The lesson of this story therefore is that success is a personal matter.* It is about what you want to do with your life. It is about values and beliefs. It is about who we are as individuals. It is about what gives us joy.

Are you successful?

If not give me a call. I can help.