

Gandhi with a Calculator

by Orion Lumiere

Editor's note: Dave Coffman was hired as Sisters' Finance Manager in December of 2007.

SOR: When you were hired, we had posted the job twice. What made you answer Sisters' ad?

Dave: I wasn't looking for a job at all. I saw the ad on a nonprofit email newsletter I get. The title was "Looking for Gandhi with a Calculator." It jumped out at me as an interesting description. I thought in some sense that it sounded like me. On a closer read, it sounded like someone had a copy of my resume in their hand when they wrote it! My experience fit with the job requirements. It also seemed exactly like what I'd envisioned as the next step for me. But I had to think about it a lot, let it sit for a weekend, struggle with it. I was happy doing what I was doing at the Western Culinary Institute. I had a great team, and we had a lot of fun together. I've never worked with more passionate group of people; the Chef Instructions were amazing.

SOR: You're a CPA; can they make big money?

Dave: Certainly they have that potential. But between you and me, to get a CPA, well, I got my Accounting Degree and then took a test.

SOR: You mean it's not hard to get?

Dave: Yes, it's hard to get, but in my opinion it's not as valuable as an MBA, where you learn things you can put into practice. It's more an indication of test-taking ability. It sounds fancier than it is. Right or wrong, it gives people a sense of confidence. I don't feel it necessarily reflects that I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing, because I know what I'm doing.

SOR: Did Sisters represent a reduction in pay?.

Dave: I took a pretty significant pay cut to work here. But I've worked a number of places, and am at the point in my career and life where I weigh my work environment and the type of organization I work for more heavily than my salary.

SOR: You worked in public schools in Ohio for a number of years; how was that?

Dave: Fun. The first school was an affluent suburban district, something like Lake Oswego. They had 12-13 school nice, new buildings. The next school I worked at was small and rural; they were still using their original building built in the 1900s. Once I got to buy the school a new bus for them. Me and the bus mechanic went through and selected all these different options. When it came in, he took me for a ride up and down the road, just me and him test driving the bus. It was fun. I sold a bus too, this really old bus they had ripped all the seats out of for school band trips. I sold it for two hundred bucks to guy who was going to gut it and take it to Harley rallies. I've never seen someone so excited to buy a twenty-year old school bus.

SOR: How's the environment at Sisters?

Dave: Yeah, there's an emphasis on relationship and team building here. Although, it's interesting, in an organization Sisters' size it's only me doing this work. I'm trying to make connections to people in other organizations who are in a similar situation, a peer group to use as a resource.

SOR: Like most admin staff, you cover two half-hour cafe shifts each week. What is that like?

Dave: I've never worked in an environment so fast-paced before. The first day I worked at the steam table, I didn't know if I was going to make it to the end of the hour shift! Tim (the cook) guided me. I just couldn't keep up. I felt fortunate to make it out of there! It's so different than what I do the rest of the day, it's hard to come back and get back to mundane sedentary tasks. I almost need to walk to come back down and get my adrenaline down.

SOR: Do you have a family?



Dave: My wife, Sarah. She teaches middle school wellness.

SOR: What do you do for fun?

Dave: Sarah and I are Oregon transplants, so we spend time walking around the city, going to farmer's markets, and hiking. We've been in Oregon three years this summer, but we both say we still feel like tourists, exploring the area.

SOR: What's something about you that most people don't know?

Dave: I like to throw parties; that's something some people wouldn't necessarily anticipate. I've been to the top of Mt. Saint Helens. I once saw Tom Jones in concert. He was great!

SOR: What's your view on homelessness?

Dave: It's an issue I feel strongly about. That's a lot of why this job was attractive to me. I think it's easy for our society to ignore the fact people are homeless. We can compartmentalize it. I think that's dangerous. Until society realizes we have a significant problem – that's one of the first steps to long-term solutions.

SOR: And more personally, why do you feel strongly about this issue?

Dave: In college I took a spring break service trip to the Community for Creative Nonviolence in Washington D.C. It was my first experience with homelessness; I came from a small town. Over the course of that two weeks I gained a perspective on how much privilege I had and that not everybody grew up like I did. And I also realized that people who are homeless are not really different than you and I; they just don't have a house.