

The Importance of the "Unimportant"

Often, we never know the impact of our actions and decisions on the world around us. Little stuff, mostly. Things that may seem totally unimportant at the time. Author Mitch Albom wrote a book about that called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. In the book, the main character doesn't know the impact he's had on other people's lives until his own life is over. But sometimes, we do have the privilege of knowing—while we're still here—the effects over time of a seemingly minor action.

Forty years ago this month, at the age of 15, I did something that seemed relatively minor at the time, but which has guided and influenced my life ever since: I became a ham radio operator. This is no exaggeration. While I saw this at the time as something to help me get more enjoyment out of the radio hobby (I was already a broadcast and shortwave DXer and CBer), and get my Radio Merit Badge in Boy Scouts, I had no way of foreseeing how being a ham would help lead me into a career in journalism, provide my first (unintentional) interaction with my future wife, and eventually result in becoming a leader in the hobby itself. But it has done all this and more, all through a series of other seemingly minor, but interconnected, events.

Along with becoming a ham, I became a member of my high school's ham radio club. When the high school in the next town got a license for a 10-watt educational FM station, our principal didn't want to get left behind, so he came to us (since we were the only people in the school who knew anything about radio) to find out how we could follow suit. We couldn't (too much \$\$\$), but he basically gave us carte blanche to do anything that didn't violate federal law that could still let him say we had a school radio station. So we started up a fake station, "broadcasting" to a speaker in the ceiling outside our radio room, followed the next year by providing programming to the cafeteria during lunch over the public address system.

Around the same time, our school was starting up a community internship program, in which students could spend a few hours each week at a local business that interested them, in order to get a first-hand view of how it really worked. One of those businesses was a local AM radio station (anyone remember local AM radio?). I was one of about two dozen students who applied for that particular internship, and was the only one who got it. I was later told by the teacher in charge that she picked me "because of how active you were in the school radio station." I never had the heart to tell her it didn't really exist!

That internship led to my doing freelance news reporting for the station, which led me to decide that I wanted a career in broadcast journalism and gave me practical experience to put on my college applications.

At college, I continued parallel involvement in both broadcast and amateur radio, working at the campus radio station and co-founding a ham radio club (along with Bob Halprin, now K1XA, who went on to become deputy communications manager at the ARRL in the '80s and '90s). My ham connections got me hooked up

with the engineering folks at the TV station whose transmitter was located on our campus. That, in turn, got me introduced to the engineering director for the Mutual Broadcasting System (another ham), who hired me to do weekend work as a tape editor for hourly sports broadcasts and advised me not to get too involved with the technical side of broadcasting if I had hopes (which I did) of being in front of the microphone instead of behind it.

My ham radio activity kept me on good terms with the engineers at radio stations I worked for after college; resulted in a request to bring in a shortwave receiver during hurricanes when I worked on the broadcast desk at the Associated Press, to monitor and report on ham activity; and introduced me to Joel Heller, WA2FFI, who would eventually become my boss at CBS News. While working at CBS, I got involved with making promotional ham radio videos and comic books, which is how I met CQ Publisher Dick Ross, K2MGA. Dick brought me to CQ in 1992 to produce a series of ham radio instructional videos. That led to working on CQ's 50th anniversary edition in 1995, becoming founding editor of CQ VHF in 1996, and eventually succeeding Alan Dorhoffer, K2EEK, as editor of CQ after Alan became a Silent Key in 1999.

Taken individually, very few of these events or actions seemed to be of major significance at the time, but taken collectively, they have all been signposts along the path of my career, and they are all bound together by a decision I made 40 years ago, at age 15, to get my ham radio license.

Plus, of course, along the way, I've made some great friends through ham radio and have gotten the opportunity to go places and do things which otherwise would have been highly unlikely, from shooting video with Senator John Glenn at the U.S. Senate ham station, W3USS, to riding in the lead convoy of the New York City Marathon, to helping provide communications in lower Manhattan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. No other hobby would have provided me with these opportunities.

Oh yes, how did ham radio introduce me to my wife? Well, we were neighbors in an apartment complex outside New York City, and the landlady (a wannabe ham herself) allowed another ham and me to put up wire antennas from our apartments into the trees behind our building. One day, one of the wires of my "horizontal vee-beam sloper dipole" (which worked amazingly well, by the way) came down in the wind, while I was off working a midnight shift at the Associated Press. I came home in the morning to a downed wire—neatly rolled up—with an unsigned note attached, telling me how I really needed to be more careful with my wires because someone could get hurt tripping over them. Even though it was many months after we began dating until she finally admitted having written that note, it is clear in retrospect that this was just one more example of ham radio helping to provide a pathway, not only for my career but for my entire life.

As I look back over 40 years in ham radio, getting that Novice license back in 1970 was clearly one of the most important "unimportant" things I've ever done.

—73, W2VU

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