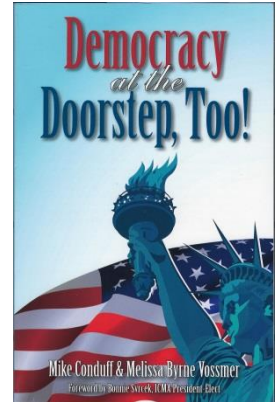


Story published in *Democracy at the Doorstep, Too!*
[Mike Conduff and Melissa Byrne Vossmer, (Denton,
TX: The Elim Group Publishing, 2012)]



Adventures of an American Girl

My first memory of public service was as a Brownie in the Girl Scouts in the late 1960s. My mother was a troop leader for my older sister's troop. My Brownie troop edged its way into many of my sister's big-girl activities. For several years, we volunteered for Santa Claus Incorporated and Head Start, cleaning old toys and making new ones for impoverished families.



This girl a city manager? Only in America

In those days, an adventurous life for a girl was a camping trip. We aspired to be mothers, teachers, and nurses. An accomplishment included learning proper etiquette for a dinner party and typing 80 words per minute on a manual typewriter.

After completing two bachelors' degrees, the realization that I could not find a job that paid enough to move out of my mother's home left me desperate and in search of any job I could find. I landed in a city, working as a secretary in housing and redevelopment. The prescribed dream for a girl was accomplished.

It did not take long for boredom to set in. Working on my master's degree gave me an opportunity to conduct research projects for my employer. I wrote staff reports for my boss, attended council meetings, and asked for more responsibility. My boss assigned me as liaison to the mobile home rent review board. This began my adventure that led me into unusual places and on a journey that pushed the boundaries for an ordinary girl from Indiana.

A new city job took me to Los Angeles during the 1984 Olympics. The swimming venue was located in a city facility near city hall—a place where I ate lunch. Lunchtime exposed me to the US Olympic swimming team and Olympic politics. Known for its large Chinese population, my city job allowed me to develop my Chinese language skills I learned a few years earlier as a foreign exchange student in Taiwan. Each day revealed a new facet of culture and athletic prowess right at the doorsteps of city hall.

My next position relocated me to a city impacted by the Los Angeles International Airport. A bedroom community, this small town complained of noise, fumes, and low property values from a neighboring operation 40 miles away. "The law is clear; your city can't change flight profiles," legal counsel advised. My assignment placed me at the side of a council member, who served as the chief labor negotiator for a grocery store chain going up against the Teamsters. Working with him, I learned never to accept "No." The adventure took me to San Francisco to work with an acoustic's



consultant, into Los Angeles before the Airport Board Commissioners, and to Washington DC to lobby for a legislative change so we could alter the flight path. Against all odds, LAX approved the flight profile change that still protects that city today.



A pig farm is a gold mine. My first city as a city manager was home to a large pig farm owned by a reputable family. Mother and son cared for it proudly. No one complained about the smell or the noise because the pigs predated the beachfront cottages. The pig farm claimed ownership to the center of the two-square mile city, leaving little room for development. Having discussions with the son, I learned about a simpler way of life, down-to-earth values, and filial piety. The son refused generous offers for purchase and development of his land because, “Mama wants to stay and tend the pigs.” The adventure of this city took me to the state and nation’s capitals to fund a train station on the ocean-side of town. Not accepting “no,” the station was funded and built, making it a rare stop along the Central Coast of California.

Coastal communities offer great adventure not just because of the eclectic cache of visitors but for the richness of resources at sea. Visiting an oil platform, hovering above the ocean presented a breathtaking opportunity. The oil company requested public officials take a day and visit a platform to observe the safety protocols. We departed on a helicopter, racing whales to our destination. Stepping on to the platform, the oil company representative advised me that I was in more danger of electrocution from the constant surge of the electrified platform than getting my high heels stuck in a metal plate. We observed men (no women) working in unfiltered sunlight, lifting barrels, soldering trusses, and cleaning every inch of the platform. Safety protocols impressed our group but did not alter the outcome of their preference that no more platforms be permitted on the Pacific coastline. By the time we returned that evening, our exhaustion testified of the no-frills, tough, working environment of life on an oil platform.

San Diego is a destination resort town, covering 400 square miles and stretching to the Mexico border. Everyday held an adventure. To name just a few:

- I ventured through underground tunnels used to smuggle people and drugs,
- Visited Mexico maquiladoras (US/Mexico manufacturing businesses),
- Talked to the world’s first super computer at the University of California at San Diego,
- Met with Sol Price (Price Club founder) on his philanthropic community projects,
- Built a homeless shelter out of an abandoned bread factory,
- Worked on major league baseball and national league football stadium projects,
- Created a 6 am-to-6 pm citywide day care program with free services for low-income families
- Toured air craft carriers, and
- Helped plan the National Republican Convention.

In this city, I watched 11,000 public servants do miraculous feats with little resource. Waking every morning to azure seascapes and marine breezes, the sting of the daily grind dissipated by the time I entered the doors of city hall.

Life reached a new level of excitement with an invitation to work as a Tribal Government Manager for an Indian Tribe. I exchanged my harbor view office for a prairie-bound trailer. I rubbed shoulders with the cows and a very large bull. The Indians I served taught me about the important values of life, having struggled for everything they had accomplished. Sharing with me their sacred traditions and unwritten language, my concept of public service changed, as we

worked to create programs to help tribal members graduate from high school, arranged for drug and alcohol addiction intervention, and designed a home loan program to replace substandard housing with homes that withstood the elements. The Tribe provided the funds to build parks, water and wastewater systems, and pave roads. Tribal members opened their hearts and homes to my husband and me. They gave freely and asked for little in return.



During my three-year contract, I toured six other Indian nations across the state in search of a tribal court program that we could use to create our own court system. My medicine woman companion, traveling with her peace pipe and herbal remedies, revealed to me the difficulties of being Indian in a white-man's world.

Finally, I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with 2,000 American Indians at the opening ceremony of the National Congress of American Indians. As the only white face in the crowd, I learned for the first time what it was like to be a true minority.

Staring into a portal to Hades, my next city led me to the darkest place on earth. Just 60 miles to the north, I returned to local government and worked for a city with its own electric utility. This adventure led me to the coalmines of Utah and a coal refinery where I peered into a seven-inch opening of the coal furnace. The intensity of the blast nearly knocked me off my feet. The work to bring electricity to our communities is dangerous, volatile, and hard. I left the refinery with a sense of amazement and gratefulness for the work done by so many never named or credited for their labor.

The coalmine experience took us into the bowels of the earth. Donning body coverings, tool belt, and miner's hat, we received training on the dos and don'ts of the mine. Cautioned about the crackling coal overhead and the darkness without a lamp, our group still gasped as we descended the shaft, venturing in and out of darkness. Heavy metal walls separated the dangerous work areas from the off-limit zones behind the equipment. We watched an enormous grinder eat through the coal like cereal, consuming everything in its path. Coal fell on our heads and crunched beneath our feet. Earth-borne smells permeated the cave, as we followed behind our guide. Upon returning to sunlight, fresh air snapped us into the reality of life in darkness. We knew that many workers had tread into this place and died. What a sacrifice just to mine the coal that powers our cities.

The wealthy coastal city of Huntington Beach offered a special insight into the lives of men and woman, who fought in Iraq. Adopting the 3/1 battalion from Camp Pendleton, I worked with my City Council in supporting families when the battalion deployed. Returning just one year later, the warriors marched proudly into a ballroom in their honor without legs and arms, having suffered as the battalion that fought in Fallujah. It took a devastating toll on the 3/1 but served as a turning point in the war against terrorism. Through the kindness of the elected officials of this beach city, these warriors and their families received a hero's welcome. What a privilege to be a part of this celebration.

One of my favorite adventures snatched us from Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colorado and flew us on the General's jet to military installations across America over five days. Referred to as the Civic Leader's Tour, Generals host local leaders at military installations to facilitate understanding of the critical role these bases play in our economy and national safety. On this trip, we visited the newly-constructed border fence along El Paso, Texas. We listened as soldiers from Fort Bliss and Border Patrol Officers spoke of the agonizing issues

faced in their duty. Children posed with us from the Mexico side of the fence while photographers memorialized our visit.



On to Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida, we attended an awards ceremony of young officers and toured the facility solely responsible for “ensuring the air sovereignty and air defense of the continental United States.” Departing Tyndall, flying into Key West, our jet became a *renegade* aircraft for a simulated assault. Snapping pocket cameras, we listened as air force jets warned us to turn back. Ignoring the warning, two jets flanked us, shooting simulated weapons at our jet. Even though we knew it was staged, chills rippled down spines as we watched the two jets close in on us and issue the stern warning shots.

An overnight stay in Key West Florida allowed a visit at the Naval Air Station and the Joint Interagency Task Force South. Responsible for drug interdiction, we spent the day on a Coast Guard Cutter. Several of us were asked to join in a mock pursuit of drug dealers on a boarding craft. Exhilarated by the speed, we felt the rush of the chase—that is until I fell off the seat in my slippery, silk suit. Two quick thinking civic leaders grabbed me by the ankles, as I hung overboard. I wore my bruises with pride, knowing that I had experienced just a fraction of what the men and women defending our borders experience daily.

Charleston Air Force Base gave us a glimpse of how a MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicle is built. Climbing inside and hanging on rails, we explored every inch of the monster machines recently adapted to protect our soldiers from IEDs. Many of the vehicle and weapon innovations came from soldiers and aviators in the field.

The last stop took us to St. Augustine, Florida where we met with the National Guard and witnessed firsthand our nation’s disaster preparedness and homeland security. Overall, it was an impressive display of competence and comfort, seeing our nation’s military capabilities in action.

City management is complex, difficult, and often thankless. Of course, our duty is to our citizens and Councils and not for the sake of adventure. Adventure, however, awaits us every day around every corner. When serving our communities, we are free to explore all facets—the positive and the negative. For me, serving in eleven cities and one Indian Nation has exposed me to experiences beyond imagination. Gems surfaced everywhere—in the people, the landscape, events, and the issues. When I looked at my job as an adventure, I found excitement, solutions, and people who cared.

Pondering a career in local government, I think of the commercials, enticing young people to find adventure by joining the military. The same goes for city management. Perhaps our logo should be, “Want the adventure of a lifetime? Serve your community and join the ranks of city management.”

I proudly say, “City management is awesome!” Where else could an ordinary girl from Indiana soar the skies, explore the coalmines, live with the Indians, and be a part of making communities healthier and stronger?

