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Volume 14 • Issue 5

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF

Tackling life's
hard topics

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Photo credit: The Studio

Name: Dave Clements

Age: 64

Married: Carlynn, 31 years

Children: Sarah, 29; Joe (passed away at age 19 on March 10, 2008)

Job title: Executive Director, La Crosse Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (LACVB) since 2005

Dave comes from a large family, including six siblings (one died in infancy), many nieces and nephews, and even great nieces and nephews. His mother was one of 14 children; his father, one of six. In total, there are 70 people in his close-knit family. Sixty-five of them, many from out of state, attended his daughter's wedding this summer. Add more than 100 first cousins, and you've got the start of a small town.

Born on the family farm in Cashton, Dave moved with his family to La Crosse before he turned 5, and has lived here ever since, with only a three-year hiatus. His resumé reveals a hard-working person and strong leader.

After college, Dave managed hotel properties in La Crosse, including Midway Motor Lodge on Rose Street - now the Best Western Riverfront Hotel - as well as in Appleton and Madison. His first professional job eventually came full circle when he received the La Crosse Area Chamber of Commerce 2001 Leadership Award for his work on the Rose Street improvement project.

Following hotel management, Dave worked nine years at the La Crosse Center, two as concession manager and seven as the building director. For the next 16 years, he held various titles in human resources, training, sales, marketing, and management.

Dave still loves to work. Supported by many, including a great board of directors at the LACVB, he says he's very blessed to represent the Coulee Region to the world of tourism and conventions.

His career skills helped him painfully wade through the grieving and healing process of losing his son, Joe, to suicide. Refusing to allow his son's tragedy to pass without some positive result, he founded the Joe Was Just Joe Foundation. Along with running the foundation, Dave speaks openly about his personal journey with suicide to help prevent suicide and support others who have experienced the suicide of a loved one.

Tell us more about starting the Joe Was Just Joe Foundation.

No parent should have to bury a child! I decided within the first 48 hours after Joe's death that we were going to do something to bring awareness to mental health issues. We need to find a way to reduce the stigma of people seeking help. Depression is no different than cancer. It is a treatable disease, and we need to let people know that seeking treatment is the best solution.

Raising awareness and eliminating the stigma are part of my effort. Robin Williams' death in August due to suicide was tragic, but it has brought more awareness to this issue.

How has the foundation been successful?

Our work to bring awareness to depression and suicide saved at least one life, someone who told me so directly. I know I have helped

others through my speaking. I have received notes, phone calls, and emails telling me this. I speak because I don't want other families to feel the great pain of losing someone to suicide. I said from the very beginning, if we can save one life, we have been successful. I believe we have saved numerous lives, and we will continue to be a voice in this region.

(Read more about the foundation on page 22).

How do you bring balance to your work life?

I enjoy woodworking and for a few years I worked part-time with a friend on the weekends remodeling homes. For our home, I have built furniture and done several remodeling projects. I also like to "re-purpose" items, rather than buy something new. A few years ago, I remodeled part of our basement, using repurposed materials that we had at our house.

We also have a dog, Riley, named by Joe. He and I convinced my wife that getting a dog was a good idea. Riley used to sleep with Joe all of the time. 

Favorites

Book: "Undaunted Courage," by Stephen Ambrose (Simon & Schuster, 1997), a great story of Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Pacific Ocean. It's written using their journals for facts. I love history, especially U.S. history.

Music: All live music, from local acts to famous groups. I've seen hundreds of big-name bands, including Led Zeppelin, Queen, The Eagles, The Who, CSNY (Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young).

Favorite parenting moment:

It's my greatest joy, having memories of watching my children grow up. Our family was fortunate for many years to spend time at our friend's cabin in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (Manistique). Sarah's wedding this summer brought all of those great times, events, and emotions full circle.

Others: I'm a big Badger and Packers fan. I also like to play cards, watch movies, and read the newspaper. My wife and I like to golf and bike together.