Marty Blair: Always Connected to the CPD | CPD

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05/15/2013

Marty and Kathi Blair enjoying winter in the Uinta Mountains.

Back in the day, most of the staff members at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities dressed in costume to celebrate Halloween. People still talk about the year Miss Piggy appeared in all her pink, porcine glory and stumped everyone who tried to guess her true identity. In reality, she was a he … and he was none other than Marty Blair, a long-time CPD staffer. (Unfortunately, no photographic proof could be uncovered for this blog post). Blair, associate director of Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE), leaves the CPD this week after more than two decades to begin his next adventure as director of The Rural Institute, Montana’s University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD). He begins his new duties on June 1, the day after his daughter graduates from Sky View High School. Blair is passionate about disability issues from birth to death, across all disabilities. “It’s about human issues and the ability to function in the community, independent and contributing,” he said. Blair started working at the CPD as an undergraduate in the interdisciplinary training division. After graduation, he taught special education at Mount Logan Middle School and did consulting work with the CPD’s interdisciplinary training division and some special ed projects. As distance education was being introduced, Blair did safe and drug-free teacher training via the new system. He also worked in the state of Washington, traveling every other week. “I really had a lot of fun,” he said. “I did that for a couple of years, helping deal with difficult behaviors.” Around the end of 1995, Blair came back to Logan as an evaluator with the Utah Assistive Technology Project (UATP). He became the coordinator of the program, and eventually the director. He wrote the first six grants in the country for assistive technology. In 2000, the Association of University Centers on Disability (AUCD) had six employees, and was just initiating its disability leadership fellowship program, Blair said. He had always been interested in federal policy issues, so he applied and was chosen as the very first fellow. “I spent a year in Washington, DC, working on government affairs and technical assistance,” he said. “I got to do some really interesting things.” After his time in Washington, Blair became the CPD’s assistant director of policy and development and finished his Ph.D. in Disability Disciplines. He became a liaison between the CPD and the state of Utah on advocacy issues and developmental disabilities, worked with the legislature to secure federal funding and served on Sen. Orrin Hatch’s advisory committee on developmental disabilities. “We got AT amendments passed without losing funding every year,” he said. “Cyndi Rowland, Sarah Rule and I were able to get two earmarks, back in the days when there were still earmarks. It was one of our greatest accomplishments.” About five years ago, Blair became associate director of TAESE and wrote the proposal for the next five years, expanding the grant and contract. During his tenure, TAESE has established statewide programs in results-focused technology in Kansas and New Mexico, and quadrupled the number of people who attended TAESE-sponsored conferences and events. He is, however, humble about these accomplishments, saying, “It’s been a great team effort. I can’t take full credit for it.” Because of his upcoming move to Montana, he recently resigned as co-chair of the Hatch committee. “I’ll miss terribly the connections,” he said. “To visit with those in the middle of decision-making, the exchange of ideas and new ways of doing things. It was a wonderful opportunity.” Blair said he would also miss the people who make the CPD what it is. “The CPD is a gem in many ways,” he said. “We don’t realize what we have here. I didn’t realize it until I went to DC. I didn’t realize I came from a place that was so honored and respected around the country. The reputation was built and maintained by the quality of research and teaching, both within the community and nationally. I’ll miss the day-to-day contact with the people who made that happen.” Fortunately, he said, communication methods these days make it less challenging to keep in touch. “I have had a great experience at the CPD. I grew up professionally here,” he said. “I’ll always be connected here, even when I’m gone.”
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