

BELLY UP THREE FEET FROM THE SHORE

Sometimes the only recourse for people who are responsible for programs on campus is to scream "cowabunga" and hope for the best.

By Lee Burdette Williams

ASK ANY PERSON responsible for developing and running programs on a college campus and he or she will readily share with you any one of a number of programming disasters: performers who did not show up, sound systems that did not work, crowds that never appeared. With any luck, that same person can tell you of a serendipitous chain of events that led to a successful program despite whatever obstacle the great gods of program planning might have placed before it. Let's be honest. If we can shirk responsibility for the former, we can hardly claim credit for the latter, and that is the fine line we walk as programmers. Being a programmer is like being a surfer—the waves are utterly unpredictable, and sometimes the best thing one can do is scream "Cowabunga!" and hope for the best.

This is pretty much what I did one winter when I found myself advising a group of students whose goal was to involve the student body in the city's annual "Walk for Warmth." The walk had been created several years earlier by a minister in town who was trying to raise money that would be used to supplement the inadequate amount of state assistance available for home heating bills. We had in town an agency that disbursed those funds—funds that would start to run out in early February. The Walk for Warmth would raise enough money for

the agency to continue to assist the poor in paying their gas and electric bills, so they would not have their heat turned off in the middle of a Michigan winter.

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half-seriously, that the only way some students would ever understand the importance of this effort was if they themselves had to try and sleep in an unheated room. One of the students in the group picked up on this, and the others quickly grew enthused. It was decided that one of them would approach the director of facilities and ask if this was possible—to turn the heat off in the residence halls for just one night.

To be honest, I never gave it a second thought. It never occurred to me that our facilities director would ever agree to this. Heating the halls was a more complicated process, it seemed,

than launching the space shuttle; turning the heat on and off even at the appropriate seasonal times seemed to take days of effort.

I was wrong. The student charged with speaking to the facilities director gleefully reported at our next

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meeting that this could, indeed, be done. The students picked a day in February that would precede the walk by about a week. They also planned a forum for that same night and invited the walk's founder and some others to come speak to students about the agency's efforts.

I remember suggesting, again half-seriously, that they call the night of unheated dorms "The Big Chill," after one of my favorite movies. I suppose that at this point I should have stopped suggesting things half-seriously, realizing that students seemed to like my ideas. I should have just shut up. But a large wave was building just beyond my sight, and I was naive enough to sit happily on my board and enjoy the view.

The students made up a flyer advertising The Big Chill that explained what would happen. It was slipped under every door on campus. The wave began to swell.

The next morning, the president's secretary called me. A parent had called him to complain about the impending chill. The dean called me. Students were calling him to complain. Students were chattering away over breakfast, and later, during lunch. The complaints were loud and repetitive: "I pay \$20,000 a year to go here. I want heat in my room." "They have no right to turn off my heat." "What if I get sick?"

Calls from parents continued, as did calls to me from the president's secretary. The president's decision: no Big Chill. I called the student group together and explained the situation, and we discussed how to turn this into a positive experience despite the reaction. I jokingly said, "Boy, the real chill is in the hearts of some students here who honestly have no idea what it would be like to spend one uncomfortable night."

I think I heard a seagull cry as the wall of water arched behind me.

The students thought, gee, what a great flyer that will make: "The real Big Chill is in the hearts of our

students. Come discuss it at our forum," or something like that. The flyers were distributed.

The wave crested and curled over the top of us.

The forum was attended by about two hundred people, half of whom were furious at the planners' assertion of insensitivity, and half of whom were disdainful of the ones who were furious. The discussion lasted two hours. Students yelled at one another. The student who was chair

of the planning committee cried when she was accused of being arrogant and self-serving. A faculty member told the students he thought they were indeed selfish, and that they should open themselves up to new experiences (some cheers, some hisses). Some failed to see the point of the Big Chill, and others were so disgusted at the reactions of students and parents that they wanted the heat to be left off until commencement.

I pretty much held my breath, kept my eyes shut against the swirling sand as I got slammed to the bottom, and hoped that someone, somewhere in the room, was learning something.

The forum ended with a challenge from the planners to their disgruntled peers: Okay, we're not turning off your heat, but please consider the circumstances of those whose heat is turned off and who do not have the option of screaming and complaining or having their parents call to get it turned back on. Please think about them as you fall asleep in your warm room tonight. Some students did indeed sign up to help with the planning for the walk.

I got home that night around eleven o'clock, too wound up to sleep. I began reading the paper. An item under the heading "Entertainment" caught my eye: "Albion College's production of 'The Big Chill,' scheduled for today, has been canceled." I'm not sure what path that press release took to get to the entertainment editor, but I certainly appreciated the irony. Education, after all, can be an entertaining process, especially if set to a Beach Boys soundtrack.

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