

Jim Stooke: No Kidding, He Hit All the Marks

Believing that any organization can be changed for the better, Stooke added resources and increased the pride and professionalism of members.

Steve Harris

This is the third article in a series on APD's former executive directors.

—Editor

Jim Stooke had already had a distinguished YMCA career when, in 1981, he became the third full-time executive director of the Association of Professional Directors of YMCAs. His nearly two decades of service in that position earned him the respect of his colleagues, the admiration of his many friends and a legacy that continues to bear fruit in the YMCA movement today.

"APD was not on my radar scope when I started at the Y," admits Stooke, now in retirement. He lives with his wife, Sandy, a Minneapolis YMCA executive, in Bloomington, MN. "But it soon became a vital part of my YMCA experience and eventually gave me a wonderful opportunity for service."

Stooke grew up in Nashville and attended Birmingham-Southern College on a full-ride basketball scholarship. "I'd already enrolled at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, and planned to enter the Christian ministry," he recalls. However, in his senior year in college, Stooke accepted a part-time youth director job at Birmingham's Five Points YMCA, his first exposure to the Y. "One day the executive encouraged me to apply for the John R. Mott Fellowship

at George Williams College. I'd actually been considering the possibility of a Y career. So I applied and was very pleased when I was chosen."

His masters work at George Williams focused on group work administration, a course of study that would serve him well in the YMCA. "Group work is reaching and impacting an individual's life through a group experience," explains Stooke. "That's what the Y is all about."

From Chicago, Stooke went to the Northside Family YMCA in Atlanta, where he focused on parent-child programs. Within three years the Northside's Y-Indian Guides program, under Stooke's leadership, became one of the largest in the country.

In the mid-1960s he became executive director of the Thomas B. Davis YMCA in Memphis, and in 1968 he became associate executive director in the Central Florida YMCA in Orlando. Kansas City was his next stop where he took on the role of associate executive director of the YMCA of Greater Kansas City.

"I enjoyed all of those experiences, and learned lessons in each situation that served me well in the

ones that followed. In Atlanta I learned how to carve a niche, how to be versatile and how to contribute to an already healthy Y. Memphis was definitely a rebuilding time where I learned the importance of creating a positive community image and establishing a strong board of influential citizens. Kansas City was just fun, working with a wonderful staff—true professionals who knew how to deliver quality programs."

A common thread throughout Stooke's YMCA career was the challenge, and joy, of teenage work. That included stints as Youth in Government director for three different states: Tennessee, Florida and Missouri.

You've Got to Be Kidding

Early in his Y career, Stooke did learn what APD was and became an active member. He served on the National Board and was president of the Program Section from 1975 to 1978. But it was still a shock to him when Bob Goff, then in the process of leaving the APD executive position, challenged him to think about applying for the job.

"I remember telling him, 'you've got to be kidding,'" Stooke remembers. "Back then it was a job that many people in the YMCA didn't fully appreciate. Bob had done wonderful work, as had Bob Knight before him. But it was still often seen as an isolating position that removed you from direct Y involvement."

But Stooke re-thought that view, and surprisingly found himself pulled in the direction of APD service. "I realized it was an opportunity to do all the stuff I enjoy doing—program development, training, meeting and event management as well as writing. It wrapped up everything I'd be looking for in my next career move."

New Goals, New Vision

Three goals energized



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JIM STOOKE'S FIVE MUST-READ BOOKS FOR EVERY Y PROFESSIONAL

Jim Stooke is a reader. He's well known in the YMCA as a man in touch with current books and articles, especially in the fields of leadership and management skills. Although his retirement reading tastes are changing (more along the lines of Tom Clancy's latest novel), he's always got a book to recommend.

We asked Jim to identify five books that a YMCA professional should pack for a visit to that proverbial deserted island. Here are his picks, followed by his comments:

Leading Change, by John Kotter. "Change is here to stay. Let's face that and learn how to manage it."

Leadership is an Art, by Max De Pree. "A very helpful book about what it means to be a servant-leader, and how we need to empower and respect the people working for us."

Credibility, by James Kouzes. "It takes a lifetime to develop credibility, but you can lose it in the blink of an eye. We better learn how to keep it."

Plateauing Trap: How to Avoid It in Your Career and Your Life, by Judith Bardwick. "We used to think that only older people plateau in their careers. The truth is it can happen at any age. This book helps you keep fresh."

Gung Ho, by Ken Blanchard. "A powerful little book about how to build a team and best treat the people we manage."

—Steve Harris

Jim Stooke when he took over the APD reins in 1981. "I wanted to help rekindle the pride of being a YMCA professional and a member of APD," he says. "It meant being a cheerleader for the organization, and I got on the road to share that message.

"I also wanted to raise the level of YMCA professionalism. My predecessors had done wonderful work, but it was a time of rapid growth and change in the YMCA. Our work force was facing new pressures. We needed to formalize our trainings, and to raise the bar for what it meant to be a Y director.

"And, finally, I wanted APD to become a primary resource for YMCA professionals, a place where they could be helped and encouraged to develop their careers to the highest levels."

These goals were formulated on the basis of his view that APD is a unique organization, vital to the success of the YMCA and the people who work in it.

Stooke's goals led him to tackle a

number of projects and career-supporting efforts. The first was born out of his experience as he applied for the APD executive job. "I'd been in the Y for two decades, but I found myself scrambling



Jim Stooke

for resources," he recalls. "How do you write a resume? How should you prepare for the interview? How do you decide when it's best to make a move? I thought, wouldn't it be cool if we could put those resources into one place—a 'YMCA career kit.' So I developed one."

The Horse to Ride

Stooke shared that material at APD chapters across the country. In fact, the creation and delivery of training experiences became a hallmark of the Stooke tenure at APD. "I used workshops as the 'horse' for the APD executive to ride,"

We needed to formalize our trainings, and to raise the bar for what it meant to be a Y director.

Stooke explains. "It was a place where I could establish visibility and credibility with the troops. It meant lots of travel time, but it was well worth it." Over his 18-year career, Stooke developed a total of 37 workshops and delivered them on over 400 occasions.

Another legacy of Stooke's leadership is the successful emergence of the APD national conference. In the late '80s the organization eliminated its two national section conferences and combined them into one unified event held every two years. The last conference Stooke managed was in Orlando in 1998, an event that drew over 1,300 people.

How Have We Changed?

The decades of the '80s and '90s were times of turbulence and change in the YMCA, and for the country itself. What changes did Stooke see in Y professionals during that period?

"The number of women colleagues greatly increased," he says. "They're bringing increased sensitivity, compas-

sion, creativity and human relations skills with them.

“The generalist/specialist pendulum continued to swing, but we all had to learn to be more versatile. More outside specialists were hired as the organization grew.

“Perhaps the greatest change I saw was in the role of program director. In the 1980s, Y participation quadrupled. We hired lots of people, many of them part-time staff members, to do face-to-face program delivery. Directors moved from being program practitioners to program managers and supervisors. That calls for different skills. I encouraged directors to see it as a positive development that increased their value to the organization.

“Finally, we also saw a big influx of highly skilled professionals coming into the Y from other fields. That had been looked on with disdain. I welcome it, but with a caveat. Those folks need ‘enculturation’ into the Y. Leaders need to support them with more formalized programs of orientation to help them be successful.”

Numbers can help measure a career. Under Stooke’s leadership, APD membership increased from 3,050 to 5,900 professionals. Annual support for the Emergency Assistance Fund grew from \$14,000 to over \$100,000. He wrote 129 columns for *Perspective*, and worked with nearly 500 different APD board members. He helped guide implementation of the first formalized strategic plan for the organization in 32 years. But a legacy goes beyond numbers.

“I’m proud of the fact that I came to a good, strong organization and helped make it better. We grew. We had great boards. We strengthened communications. When I left, I sensed the respect that folks have for APD, that they’re proud to be part of it. We set good goals and high standards, and we hit all the marks.” 

