

The Whale Foundation Presents: Transitioning Careers
How Veteran Guide Mike Boyle Found A Dream Job in the Real World And His Way Back To The River

Work Hard, Pay Attention,
and do the Best Job You Can

By Mike Boyle
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This credo has served me well throughout most of my life, especially as a guide in Grand Canyon and on other rivers around the world. It's not profound or inspirational yet it embodies simple traits that almost any trip leader or manager would love to see in his/her boatmen or employees. Anyone who has ever paid me to do a job has gotten this in return, and it's all I ask of the people who work for me. When asked by the Whale Foundation to do this article, I jumped at the chance. Having been forced to experience it first-hand, I know how difficult the transition from guiding to something else can be. This transition is particularly challenging because nobody wants to quit guiding.

Graduating from college in 1973 started me off with a career in business. Having moved to California from my roots in Ohio, a new world opened up to me. After about four years I decided I didn't want to work the next 40 odd years or so only to wake up one day wondering what I had done with my life. I had a burning passion to experience the outdoors. So I left the business world and took off into the mountains. It wasn't long before I landed a job with oars as a shuttle driver for river trips on the local California Rivers. That was short lived because I realized the place to be was on the river, not driving the truck. I started as a regular guide in 1978.

In 1979, the opportunity came up for my first Grand Canyon training trip. Needless to say, I was hooked on the Grand Canyon after that first trip. During the same year I was hired by Sobek Expeditions to run Watut River trips in Papua New Guinea. What a year that was! An incredible world of adventure that I had only dreamed of was now mine to explore. I was 29 years old, embarking on an unstoppable journey to spend my life in the outdoors, running rivers, and meeting some of the most unforgettable people of my life.

I had a great run for fifteen years as a full-time guide. My schedule towards the end included working in Alaska during the summer, Chile in the winter, and Grand Canyon in the spring and fall. Usually, I was able to squeeze in plenty of time off and every so often even a specialty trip like an exploratory river expedition. It was a glorious and rewarding life. Along the way I even managed to marry my best friend and make a long distance marriage work. My life was adventurous, exciting, and fulfilling beyond my wildest dreams.

In my late thirties, my body was feeling the effects of a hard-driving athletic lifestyle, and I started to experience severe pain in my left hip. This was outside the realm of normal bodily aches and pains, so I sought out the opinion of an orthopedic surgeon. He diagnosed me as having the hip joints of a 65 year-old man and facing joint replacement surgery on both hips. In complete denial, I went off to run another river season thinking that I just needed to get in better shape.

The following year the pain in my hip had escalated, so I sought out a second opinion. The results were the same. My state of denial continued as I left for yet another river season thinking that I could overcome this through fitness. That year I realized that my fitness level was irrelevant, as the pain was getting worse. The reality of my physical condition was starting to look all too unavoidable. I went

on to guide for a few more years while getting two more opinions from doctors. After five opinions and several years of denial, I had my first hip replacement in May 1993. My perfect world had stopped spinning.

I bounced back from my first hip replacement, and after eight months I was about 90 percent recovered. That was a long period of introspection and soul-searching, with no idea of what to do with my life. Guiding was over, although there were brief periods when a return to that career seemed possible. Shortly after my recovery all hopes of a return to guiding were dashed when it became evident that my other hip would have to be replaced. Two years after the first, I had my second hip replacement. This time there were complications. Inserting the prosthesis had split my femur lengthwise causing muscle spasms that would prolong my recovery and leave me more debilitated than the first surgery.

This several-year period of being carved up and put back together was incredibly depressing—but not spent idly. After much thought, I returned to college in pursuit of a degree in geography and a teaching certificate. Substitute teaching at local high schools helped me reason that my best opportunity at a second career would be as a high school geography teacher. After all, as a guide I had traveled all over the world, related to people from all walks of life, and had assimilated all of that knowledge and experience. It seemed like a natural progression.

Four months after graduation the new school year was starting, and I was still pounding the pavement looking for a job. It was difficult to even get an interview at one of the 40 schools to which I applied. Finally the principal at a small school succumbed to my pleading and offered some information about why he could not hire me. Apparently my former employer of fifteen years would not answer inquiries about my years of employment. It was the kiss of death for a prospective teacher. When I questioned George, my former employer, he offered up that he was too busy. Evidently fifteen years of working hard, paying attention, and doing the best I could was not good enough for him. I was devastated, deeply depressed, and ultimately lost.

At this point my chances of getting a teaching job were nonexistent since I had applied without success to every school within a two-hour drive of where I lived in Texas. I started to look for anything that would give me a paycheck. During this time I was talking with Tony Anderson (ta), venting my frustration, when he told me that Steve Carothers' company swca Environmental Consultants had an office in Austin. After several attempts to contact Steve, I was frustrated and about to give up. Ta happened to be plowing Steve's drive one day that winter and told Steve of my plight. Later that night ta called saying, "Be at Steve's office at nine a.m. Tuesday for an interview." I showed up Tuesday at 9 a.m. wearing a suit and tie and polished cowboy boots. The interview went well, and after a few days Steve called me back in and offered me an entry-level job to see what I could do. He actually told me "We're going to throw you into the deepest water we can find and see how well you can swim." Today I'm still with swca, and Steve has never let me forget how funny it was to see me show up in a suit and tie for that interview.

Steve gave me a chance based on ta's recommendation and probably a few inquiries he made with mutual friends in Flagstaff. I had no consulting experience and knew little about the industry, although, I remember thinking, "How hard can it be?" This new challenge was scary, but at least I didn't have to run Crystal. My thought process was to approach it the same way I would lead a river trip. I had to get the passenger list, buy and pack the food, load the truck, get everything to the river, etc. It was all basic organization and making sure that I didn't miss anything. In the eighties Sobek guides had a saying "Ya gots to pay attention." This is a good idea when traveling in foreign countries, running new rivers, and working in remote areas. The same holds true when starting a new career in unfamiliar surroundings. The end result was very successful because I worked hard, paid attention to everything, and did the best job I could.

Five years later, I realize that my perfect world is spinning again. I'm the Managing Principal of the Flagstaff office of swca, with 25 employees and manage a couple million dollars in annual revenues. Recently, I was instrumental in winning a project to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the Colorado River Management Plan in Grand Canyon National Park—a dream job for an old boatman.

The transition from a tremendously rewarding career in guiding has been extremely difficult. Working hard, paying attention, and doing the best job you can are attributes not unique to me but found in most guides with whom I have worked. These attributes are not common in the business world, like I assumed they would be. Guides are a special group of people that possess innate abilities of resourcefulness and common sense, which are recipes for success in any job. I didn't really know this five years ago, but love and support from my wife, help and faith from my friends, and an opportunity from Steve helped me realize this in retrospect. Do guides have these attributes and abilities naturally, and that's what makes them good guides, or do they develop them over time through a career in guiding? I'm not sure. However, I do know that at least once a day I look at the photos on my office wall and wish I were back on the river with those guides.

Of course, I knew Whale. I ran a few trips with him, double camped with him, helped him push his boat back in the water, and had more than a few beers with him. He was our friend and fellow boatman who needed a hand and didn't ask for it. Perhaps the only good thing to come out of the end of Whale's career is the impetus to start the Whale Foundation. I know I sure needed all the help and support I could get and I would have called on them during my time of uncertainty and fear. It's a nice feeling to have a safety net like the Whale Foundation to help make the transition a little easier.

Mike Boyle

The Whale Foundation is here to help boatmen navigate a career transition from river guide to real world successfully. The Kenton Grua Memorial Scholarship was created to serve the needs of someone, like Boyle, who requires further education to meet his or her goals. The first recipient will be announced soon! Please contact us for more information on any of our services or to donate your time or financial assistance.

The Whale Foundation, PO Box 855, Flagstaff az 86002-0855

Our toll-free Boatman Help Line is 866-773-0773 or check out our website, a work in progress, at www.whalefoundation.org