
Serendipity and Passion - Two Peas in a Pod: An Interview with Michael Sterns

Contributed by Sid Smith
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Michael's success is remarkable by any standards, especially for a self-published author of a children's book. While Michael didn't reveal his specific strategies for success, once you understand a little about his diverse background, his success makes perfect sense.

When I spoke with Michael on the phone, he was sitting outside a Vermont book store in which he'd just placed his books. Michael was on the road for his summer run up and down the Eastern Seaborg, hitting book stores, telling stories, camping out, and staying at hostels to keep the costs down. He was relaxed, having fun, and clearly in his element. Even in our brief conversation, he never stopped selling.

How an eclectic business man became a children's writer

The good news is that Michael loved writing in High School. He'd won awards and taken several advanced placement writing classes. The bad news is that his college didn't require any additional writing classes. Then, like many of us, Michael took the path he was supposed to take: get a job that makes good money.

His search for meaning brought him through med school, business school, law school, property management, real estate, sales, and advertising. Diversity of interests certainly has its advantages, but making a good living usually isn't one of them. Frustrated and disheartened by an inability to find his passion, Michael decided to take a break.

He carried his camera, a couple hundred dollars, and camping gear to the four corners region where Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, and Arizona meet. Known for its beauty and solitude, this was the ideal place for Michael to face the big questions in life. In his words, he sat by a river and asked, "What the hell am I going to do?"

To maintain sanity and a connection with his girl friend back home in Florida, Michael and she traded hand-written generally romantic stories via snail mail. While in Santa Fe, Michael bought a small book about Kokopelli, the flute-playing, roving minstrel or trader, rain priest, hunting magician, trickster, and seducer of maidens from Anasazi or "Ancient Ones" tradition.

The story of Kokopelli and the Butterfly flew from his mind to the tip of his pen. "I could hardly keep up with the words that were streaming from my head," Michael relates. If you're a writer, you've likely experienced this exhilarating phenomena. He adds, "My eyes were wide the whole time as these really cool ideas kept coming out."

Michael had always wanted to write children's books, but he never considered it a remote possibility. Yet, long after the story was written, he kept coming back to it. "It had all the good morals, a wonderful story line, and my girl friend loved it," he says.

What then? This is the point at which most wanna-be authors turn back to their "real work" instead of letting destiny, fate, or as James Hillman calls it - your Daemon - take over. Fortunately, Michael decided to let serendipity do its magic.

Anyone who has followed a dream can attest to the wonderfully strange synchronicities that take place. For Michael it was in the creation of the book. He knew that to do it right he needed high quality images. But, where to find a good graphic artist with whom he could work?

The weekend following his decision he met a cartoonist from Walt Disney Studios who was so inspired by the story that he agreed to do the artwork for \$1,500 and a promise of 5% of the gross sales. That's about \$50,000 worth of artwork for a fraction of the cost and a shaky promise of more later.

"I totally took our chance meeting as a sign," says Michael. It was just the beginning of what has become his life's mission. "For the first time in my life I became a visionary. I was given all these little stepping stones to make it happen. That's how you know you're on your path."

Serendipity didn't end with the artist. When Michael was ready to print and market the books, he figured he'd need about \$10,000 in cash to do it right. He didn't have one dime of what he needed, which meant every cent had to be raised. Again, he was introduced to the right person at the right time, who with a wink and a simple gesture, gave Michael the clue to raising the funds easily. (If you want to know what he did, you'll have to read the next issue of this magazine...)

Within a matter of weeks Michael had the full \$10,000 to print 2500 copies of his full-color, hard-bound (and heavy) book.

Now, Michael knew, comes the hard part - selling the book.

Be sure to tune in to the next magazine issue to hear the rest of Michael's story and where he is to day in his travels, and more importantly, his sales.

Also in this issue: "Why This Successful Self-Published Author Said NO to Traditional Publishing"

