Phil Fuehrer applies personal journey to student development

Ed Day

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As Soviet tanks loomed in the background, the 300,000 dissidents that filled Wenceslas Square in Prague, Czechoslovakia began to jingle their keys in protest. Amid the turbulent sea of jangling metal, stood a vacationing Minnesotan named Philip Fuehrer.

Few Americans can say that their first big political protest was during the height of the Velvet Revolution. In November 1989, the demonstrations resulted in a peaceful transition from a one-party Communist regime to a parliamentary form of government.

“It was just an electric atmosphere,” said Fuehrer, currently the interim director of student programming at Metropolitan State University. Fuehrer joined the Army right out of high school and at the time was stationed in Germany as a Czech and Slovak linguist specialist.

Student activism and politics have been a part of Phil Fuehrer’s life ever since, even though his first campaign ended with less than spectacular results. Fuehrer received just 92 votes, 3 percent of the total cast, in his attempt to become the student body president at the University of Minnesota in 1992, setting the record for the fewest votes.

Having served four years in the military, Fuehrer stood out as a nontraditional student by appearance and life experience; students in their mid-twenties on college campuses were not entirely normal at that time.

After earning a degree in European Area Studies, he ran for state representative in 1996 and became the first Independence Party candidate to receive the endorsement of a major media outlet, the Pioneer Press. Still, Fuehrer finished with only 6 percent of the vote. He also ran for a seat on the St. Paul City Council in 1997 and 1999. He did not win either time.

Despite the electoral losses, Fuehrer found campaigning to be a fantastic and beneficial opportunity. Candidates learn a lot about themselves and often grow as people when seeking office, as well as discovering the inner workings of our political system.

“It’s a very enlightening experience,” Fuehrer said.

**Developing Solutions, Leaders**

Fuehrer has had some political success behind the scenes. He joined the Independence Party and took on a leadership position as platform committee chair in 1995, shortly after they attained major party status.

The focus on ideas and solutions has been helpful in his various roles at Metropolitan State. He began as office manager for student life in 2001. Presently, many students go to Fuehrer for questions about starting groups and event planning.

“I try to develop students as critical thinkers and independent minds that think through their options and make decisions accordingly,” said Fuehrer, though he will definitely provide his personal opinion if asked.

His favorite part of the job is advising and counseling student and then watching them grow over the course of their college career. The advice isn’t always the same, as some students just need more confidence, other need to decide on a direction, and so forth.

Similarly, when dealing with the Student Senate, he often asks questions to help zero in on the desired result and gives a range of alternatives before putting the decision back into their hands.

“I don’t see my job as one to mandate the end result,” Fuehrer said.

**A Campus Living Room**

Creating a collegiate atmosphere is difficult for a commuter school with four permanent sites and locations spread throughout the Twin Cities metro area. Aside from the lack of common gathering areas, Metropolitan State has many nontraditional students who already have an established circle of friends and are involved in their own communities.

The Student Center is key to increasing student involvement and activities on campus because the school has management oversight of the space. The new food service and a fitness centers will also help.

For now, student programming has promoted and offered discounts to off-campus events that students can attend on their own. At least 70 students attended the Jan. 8 Timberwolves game, 48 tickets were sold to a screening of the new “Star Wars” movie, and as part of Fall Fest, 90 people took advantage of the discounted kids’ rides at Como Park in St. Paul.

“The idea is to find those activities that have value to the students,” Fuehrer said.

The next step is selling events in the building. Roller skating is a possibility, as the University has the ability to transform its own space. And, while the giant parking ramp looks boring, its presence means one less headache for anyone attending an event on campus.

“I really want to make the student center a living room for the University,” Fuehrer said. Because students need a place to relax, recreate, eat and just feel at home.

In the end, Fuehrer views his role as “making sure students are ready for the next journey.” Hopefully a successful, peaceful transition to life after college.