

Making a Difference

Side benefits of a rewarding profession

BY DANA ABNEY, SR/WA



In college, I thought it was my destiny to become a civil engineer. In pursuit of that goal, I received degrees in geography, surveying and even an engineering certificate. Working my way from the ground up in sewer and storm drains to power transmission lines, I found myself in the survey department of Sierra Pacific Power (SPPC) in Reno, Nevada, where I met Dick Pyatt, a right of way agent extraordinaire and all-around nice guy. He took me under his wing and taught me that yes, working on utility corridors and easements can be fun!

In 2003, I left SPPC and dove into the area of relocation and the Uniform Act. My first assigned project was clearing space downtown for the newly planned Reno Events Center. Now downtown was right in the middle of three “weekly motels,” a euphemism for tenants who were essentially homeless. My supervisor and I would visit the area every afternoon to interview the tenants, sometimes eight of them from one room. This was a neighborhood where you would not want to be walking alone after dark.

And this is where I learned that what we do as agents really can make a difference in someone’s life.

From one of the motels came a small family – Dad, Mom and two small boys. They had recently moved to the area, knew no one, and Dad was working nights at the convenience store down the street. During the interview, Dad told me that before he could finish high school, he was forced to drop out and work the fields to support his family. Mom never said a word, so Dad explained that she had come from an abusive situation that only ended when her father was imprisoned. And the boys had never known what it was like to stay in one place for longer than six months.

Under the Uniform Act relocation guidelines, they qualified for a two-bedroom house. Their needs were simple – near to shopping, schools and a bus line. And the boys requested a yard so they could finally have a dog. While I tried to engage Mom in a conversation, she never spoke a word.

After several attempts, I finally found a manufactured home two blocks from an elementary school with a grocery store in a little strip mall just down the road with a bus stop right in front. Most important of all, the owners were willing to take a chance with this family and finance the remainder of the sales price after the federal down payment, even waiving the payments for six months to allow the family to get back on their feet. When they first saw the house, the boys began running around in the fenced yard. Dad was grinning, but Mom looked very apprehensive.

It wasn’t until we were signing the papers at the seller’s house and celebrating with the cider they had brought that Mom spoke her first words to me. With tears in her eyes, she asked, “Is it really ours? Is this our dream come true? We never thought we could afford a home of our own.” As I was leaving, a friendship was forming between the two families, with community support and recipes being exchanged.

Two years later, I drove past the house, admired the fresh paint and the vegetable garden, and saw the boys playing with their friends and a Labrador in the front yard.

This is why being a Right of Way Agent is so rewarding and why I love this work. Sometimes the good guys win. ✪



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