

*(This is from the City of Austin employees' magazine, three years ago... An update from Joe...)*

*Since this was written, my mom passed away. We now have four grandchildren (two girls, 9 and 4-1/2, and two boys, 6 and 2-12). I have also been teaching Russian on-line for two years now for Drake University in Des Moines, in addition to my classroom courses in Austin. I have been back to Poland and am planning a trip to Russia this coming summer where I will fulfill a bucket list item and travel on the trans-Siberian railway. Life is good.*

*JL*

### **City Source: Where are they now? Joe Liro**

By Mike Cox

When city staff begins its annual budget process, one Austin tax payer can particularly empathize.

“One year Dan Davidson [then city manager] told me, ‘Joe, you gotta keep the budget under \$100 million’,” laughs former assistant city manager Joe Liro, who began his eight-year city career in 1971. (The current city budget is \$1.2 billion.)

A native of Ludlow, Mass., Liro started as a budget analyst and pretty quickly gained promotion to budget director. (But Homer Reed, his boss, told him he’d have to cut his hair shorter before he could become a director.) In 1975, Davidson made Liro an assistant city manager.

Leaving the city in 1979, Liro entered private business with his father-in-law. “In short, I made a bundle and I lost a bundle,” he laughs. “After losing that bundle and shutting down that business, I decided take a year off and rethink things.”

### **Plan B**

Having grown up in a predominantly Polish American neighborhood, Liro started reconnecting with his heritage. He went back to school and studied Polish language and history at the University of Texas.

“I enrolled in graduate school in the Slavic languages department and had to take Russian,” he continues. “I was really good at it, started getting grants, started teaching, and started traveling to Russia with exchange programs. I studied in Moscow, traveled widely in Eastern Europe and the then Soviet Union.”

Via cell phone from a hospital waiting room in Massachusetts, Liro answered questions about his career while waiting for his 90-year-old mother to come out of surgery:

**How do we know you weren't a spy?**

"I taught American government and civics under a U.S. Information Agency exchange program at a magnet school in southeast Belarus, a republic between Poland and Russia. Afterwards, I worked in Minsk for the American Council of Teachers of Russian coordinating exchange programs for the U.S. government and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

"My brother thinks I was a spy and so did the KGB. I was frequently followed by KGB agents and twice, though not arrested, was invited to visit the KGB office. They watched me fairly closely, but I wasn't working for the CIA."

**So you didn't get a radioactive cocktail?**

"Actually, I received a decoration from the Ministry of Education in Belarus."

**What the highlights of your time in Russia?**

"One of the most interesting experiences is that I once had a conversation with Michael Gorbachev. In Krakow, just before the unraveling of the Soviet Union. He autographed a photo I took of him, Raisa, and Edvard Shevardnadze. And I've toured 'the zone,' the radioactive area in southeastern Belarus contaminated by the Chernobyl disaster."

Returning to Texas in 1999, he took a position as director of admissions for the Austin's Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. In addition, he resumed teaching Russian part-time at Austin Community College.

After retiring last August, he has continued teaching at ACC. He and another associate professor have 40 students between them.

"I enjoy teaching Russian and enjoy working with students," he says. "Students who take Russian don't take it just to meet a language requirement."

**What did you gain from your work with the city?**

"Being able to serve at relatively high level is an at once humbling and energizing experience. It gave me a lot of confidence and a sense of adventure about life."

**How has Austin and City Hall changed since you left the city?**

“We had UT and state government at the time,” he says. “That was the core of a sleepy economy. Today’s is far more interesting. Downtown is a vital and vibrant place. I’m excited about light rail. I lived in Europe for years and never had a car. I’d rent one every once in a while, but I used trains and metros most all the time.”

“When I started, women made less than men. As a budget analyst...I was a ‘pay grade 17.’ The women analysts with whom I worked were ‘pay grade 14.’ It was a given. No one complained.”

### **So what hasn’t changed?**

“Do we build new libraries, add police officers, raise taxes? Those issues are always there.”

### **Any regrets?**

“We made at least one awful mistake – the STNP [South Texas Nuclear Project.] And I’ve continuing doubts about the Fayette coal plant. I applaud today’s green energy efforts. They may redeem those energy sins.”

### **How do you see your legacy as a city employee?**

“I was there during the time when all the community development block grants were being handed out,” he says. “That’s what helped stimulate the notion of citizen participation in local government. Most of the neighborhood associations date from this time. They could be really demanding, but taking part in local government is absolutely essential.”

### **The rest of the story?**

“I have degrees and diplomas from the Air Force Academy; the University of Colorado; the University of Texas at Austin; the Jagiellonian University of Krakow, Poland; and Moscow State University. (The MSU diploma has a hammer and sickle at the top!)

“My spouse is the Rev. Judith Liro, an Episcopal priest. We have three grandchildren in Houston and Chicago and a fourth on the way. The little ones are truly a blessing. I spend a lot of time with them and in cultivating and harvesting my herb gardens.

“I have also become a collector of Socialist Realism art. And I can sing several Beatles songs in Russian and recite the poetry of Pushkin and Lermontov and Akhmatova.”

### **Any philosophy you’d like to share?**

“The ‘Russian’ path of my life is one I did not plan for. What was intended to be a one-year interval of study and reflection turned into 25, and a respectable career. As I look back on my life, I realize that I have lived more of it under ‘Plan B’ than ‘Plan A.’ And it’s not been bad at all!”

# # #