

## Jerry Stepaniak

President, Stepaniak & Associates Consulting LLC  
(Member since 2005)

Jerry Stepaniak's career path has led him to wide-ranging job experiences, and in many of them, he was "the fixer."

"I've actually had several different careers and looking back I realize that I must like to fix things because whenever I've been presented a choice, it seems I always chose the path that was the most challenging," said Jerry.

He said he had to learn to overcome challenges at an early age. He was born in Stevens Point, WI, to parents of limited means and his father died at age 24 when Jerry was 1.

"I had a difficult childhood and it wasn't fun at the time, but I learned to navigate some pretty choppy waters. It's one of those things where if you come out on the other end, you're stronger for it. Later in life, I'd stop and say, 'Wait, why did I do this, why did I take on this huge challenge' but I think it all makes sense when you put it in the context of what I grew up with. In retrospect, I've had a very rewarding career because with each job I've had, I had to figure out how systems work. I learned a lot."

Jerry's paternal grandparents were a stabilizing influence in his life and they encouraged him to go to college.



*Jerry and his daughter Abby on their Rotary trip to Guatemala*

"My grandparents offered a place where I could go for structure; a place that was home," he said. He also credits the support of his wife, Linda, whom he has been with since high school.

"Linda has been a strong anchor and partner and a major influence in my life in so many ways. And she gets primary credit for shaping our two daughters into the responsible adults they are today."

Jerry earned a degree in psychology from St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, and later, a master's degree in social work from the University of Illinois, where he competed for and secured an internship with the Illinois State Government Bureau of the Budget.

"I worked for the governor's office—a place where money, politics and policy all come together," said Jerry, who was only 24 years old at the time. "It was an incredible place to be. You had to do your homework, and know what you were talking about or you'd get burned alive in public."

He went on to work for the governor's office for about five more years, supervising budget analysts handling a budget totaling more than \$4 billion. Next, he was hired as deputy of management services for the Illinois Department of Corrections, overseeing all administration, budgeting and capital construction. At the time, the department of corrections was a mess, according to Jerry, with a variety of patchwork systems, violence and gang issues and poor management. It was also the beginning of a decades-long growth surge in the state's prison system, with the number of inmates increasing from 5,000 to 13,000 in four years.



*Jerry and the Mayor, Joyabaj GT Alcalde*

“It was very intense work and an interesting but tough period. We instituted major monitoring and decision-making systems that still largely exist today. But I watched as co-workers began to rapidly burn out, and prison work is deeply intensive up to and including routine death threats to my boss and other officials. So, I decided I should pursue other options.”

When Jerry and Linda were on a trip home to visit family, they stopped the car to admire the beautiful views in Wisconsin and decided it might just be time to move back to their home state. Jerry was hired by Milwaukee County and eventually became second in charge of the sprawling health and human services department. During his tenure, the department reinvigorated the medical hospital, behavioral health, social services and welfare programs. He and his staff established the framework for development of the former county grounds into what is now the rapidly expanding Milwaukee Regional Medical Center. He also negotiated the lease of offices for more than 700 staff as the initial tenant in the Schlitz Park development.



*Jerry with RCM GT travelers and community members in La Laguna GT*

With a change in Milwaukee County Executives in the 1988 election, the top health and human services department leadership was entirely replaced. “I became a consultant overnight,” Jerry said, beginning a new career of consulting with non-profits, counties and businesses that interfaced with state and local governments.

One customer was Maximus, a for-profit company which provides services to manage government-sponsored programs. Jerry worked on successfully marketing and then implementing the Welfare-to-Work program in Arizona. Later, the W-2 program in Wisconsin became mired in controversy.

Jerry was asked to come back and get things back on track. He had to simultaneously diagnose and fix problems, coordinate several high visibility government investigations and install new management staff, while continuing to provide quality services to clients.

“Someone compared it to putting new engines in an aircraft while you ensured it was still flying. It was fascinating work.”

Jerry, who served as a City of Wauwatosa alderman for 10 years, continued running his consulting business but said he has been mostly retired for the last four to five years. He keeps busy with a variety of volunteer work and with Rotary, chairing the Rotary World Community Services Committee that has implemented multiple water system, bridge and school construction projects in Guatemala and other countries in partnership with Engineers Without Borders, local university engineering departments and other Rotary clubs and districts. Jerry also coordinates the club’s behind-the-scenes Tyrotarian Tours in conjunction with Avi Lank.

“It’s been extremely enjoyable and satisfying work. A huge part of Rotary for me involves the people, getting to know them and working side-by-side with them. But the other part is service and doing something to help mankind. At my age, I’d rather help create water systems for people in need than read books or worry about investments. You can’t just give money. You need to actively engage in something to help people who don’t have the advantages in life that we enjoy. This committee and this club are doing incredibly good work on the international side.”

Outside of work and philanthropic efforts, Jerry enjoys Badger and Packers games, theatre, live music performances and travel. He and Linda, who live in Wauwatosa, have two adult daughters and three grandchildren.

**Editor’s Note:** Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.