

Re-Inventing Yourself — A Case in Point

University of Texas Professor, Turned Arbitrator-Mediator

By James O. Armstrong

On a recent Southwest Airlines flight from Dallas to Oklahoma City, I happened to meet someone who is called into the situation only if there is a dispute between a labor union and management that cannot be resolved by the parties themselves. Yes, he belongs to an elite group of men and women in the US, who are called into play only when labor arbitration is required. Arbitration in the US is voluntary in the private sector and mandated in the federal sector, but the parties don't need to go through the federal government and often don't to decide on an arbitrator.

Further, at age 65, he too definitely reinvented himself from a University of Texas Graduate Business School professor to what he is today, a US labor arbitrator-mediator. After nearly 30 years at the University of Texas at Austin, **I. B. "Beber" Helburn** went from teaching Labor Relations, HR Management, Negotiation and Arbitration, with a part-time job of serving in his current capacity, to now practicing what he had preached full-time.

Of course, since Beber Helburn had begun his University of Texas at Austin Business School stint in January, 1968, UT Austin has steadily risen in prominence to what it has become today. Modestly, Helburn doesn't choose to take any particular credit for the school's current reputation, although in all honesty being able to take classes from such a professor would be exciting for any student.

After completing his Ph.D from the University of Wisconsin Industrial Relations Institute, with a major in Industrial Relations, Dr. Helburn principally served as a university professor, but he also briefly functioned as a consultant to the Committee on Wages and Employment to the House of Representatives, State of Texas for approximately one year (which report led to the passage of the first state minimum wage law). Helburn has been listed on the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, labor arbitration panel from 1972 until the present, the labor panel of the American Arbitration Association since 1974 and the labor panel of the National Mediation Board since 1992.

Helburn has been involved with Arbitration panels over the years, which have included all of the following companies: AT&T and the Communications Workers of America;



I. B. "Beber" Helburn

Continental Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (Flight Attendants); Continental Airlines and the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA); Federal Express Corporation and ALPA; GAF Corporation and PACE International Union; Internal Revenue Service and the National Treasury Employees Union; International Paper Company and PACE plus the IBEW; Lone Star Steel and the United Steelworkers of America; Lucent Technologies and the Communications Workers of America; Major League Baseball and the Major League Players Association (Salary); Southwest Airlines and the International Association of Machinists (Reservation Agents); Southwest Airlines and TWU Local 555 (Ramp Personnel); U. S. Customs Service and the National Treasury Employees Union; U. S. Postal Service and the American Postal Workers Union, National Association of Letter Carriers and the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association; and the Veterans Administration Medical Center and the AFGE Local 1633.

On that day, he was flying to Oklahoma City and, then, driving to Elk City, Oklahoma in order to arbitrate a dispute between the



Beber & his wife Judith Helburn on their Antarctic Cruise (1/07), where they saw seven different species of Penguins.

US Postal Service and the American Postal Workers Union there over a staffing issue. In fact, Helburn has often arbitrated contract interpretation and discipline issues in the past at many other US Post offices in the Southwest and Southeast, as he has also done at Federal Express and Southwest Airlines too, among others.

For Beber, his typical Tuesday-Thursday weekly schedule now does not represent as much "a reinvention as more of an evolution," he said. As an exception, he commented that he was willing to take a Southwest Airlines case on Monday because, unlike many clients, Southwest Airlines and its unions are willing to set cases for Monday hearings. Further, he sometimes but not always works long hours to get disputes resolved. Please bear in mind that before his "official" retirement from UT Austin, he was certainly able to pepper his Graduate B-School lectures with many real world examples that sometimes were "stranger than fiction," he concluded.


Today, Helburn may hear two or even three cases, each in a different location, and maybe each in a different state, in the course of a week. This labor arbitrator currently experiences a 50-55% settlement rate, before the parties get to Beber. Often, he said just the threat of an imposed resolution rather than a voluntary settlement motivates the conflicting parties to reach an agreement before meeting with him.

In fact, a tactic that he often uses in these situations goes something like this. Before beginning the hearing, Helburn will tell the opposing parties that perhaps they should each "take one last shot at it" in an attempt to reach a settlement that both sides can accept. In fact, he told me that this tactic, by itself, periodically results in a settlement.

When he's not dealing with arbitration matters, Helburn stays involved as the co-chair of a \$10.5 million capital campaign for Congregation Beth Israel in Austin, Texas. Others have served more total times as president than he has, but he is the only one in the congregation's 128 year history to have served two separate terms (10 years apart) as president.

Helburn, who turned 65 in August, 2003 now qualifies for Medicare plus he and his wife **Judith Helburn**, whom he met on the first day of freshman English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also continue to receive medical coverage through his university group health insurance plan. Judith and Beber have two married children and four grandchildren living nearby. Judith is a Certified Sageing Leader for the Spiritual Eldering Institute. She has also been active in and on the board of Story Circle Network for Women with Stories to Tell, which has been organized as an international organization since 1998.

Over the years, this stalwart adopted Texan has written books and monographs such as "*Public Employer-Employee Relations in Texas: Contemporary and Emerging Developments*" (1971), he has contributed chapters and proceedings toward a better understanding within his profession, he has written articles for professional journals, and published teaching cases.

In conclusion, we should certainly realize that there will always be labor disputes, which will continue to provide valuable work for a seasoned professional like I. B. Beber Helburn. While not an employee, this independent contractor does perform a valuable function for our economy as a whole. Plus, he continues to be well compensated, too, for his time (including travel) and his skilled arbitration efforts. 

Excerpted from the book, *Now What? Discovering Your New Life and Career After 50*, by **James O. Armstrong**. It is available at www.nowwhatjobs.net. NowWhatJobs.net was set up to better inform individuals and employers about the current and coming labor shortage facing North America. James is editor of NowWhatJobs.net, and he is president of James Armstrong & Associates, Inc., which is a North American media representation firm.



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