



Fuel for Life's Purpose at .50 Per Mile

Eric Mann never planned on a YMCA career – until it became the only place he wanted to be

By Doug Milne, Jr.

There's an encouraging idea which asserts the best reason to look back is to see how far one has come.

Venturing down that road would certainly fill Eric Mann's heart with confidence and inspiration, but given all he has done and come from within YMCA ranks, speaking to it would also *fill* quite a big block of time for the First Coast YMCA's retiring President and CEO.

And, with that, a look back at how Mann's YMCA career took shape and ultimately landed him on Florida's First Coast.

Finding the Fuel

What initially drew Mann's attention to the YMCA was, literally, the offer of a few bucks here and there. While at Mars Hill University in North Carolina in the early '80s to complete his Bachelor of Science degree, he was tasked with embarking on an internship.

"I chose the YMCA in Asheville because they offered me .50 a mile for gas," Mann laughed. "That was the key. I got some gas, pizza and beer money. So, that's how I ended up at the YMCA for the first time."

Following his 1981 graduation, that same YMCA made him a job offer, though it wasn't exactly going to make him rich quickly.

"I didn't go to school to earn \$5 an hour, but I took it," he said. "I was a youth worker, working with kids every day. A year into it, the New Haven YMCA came looking for a Youth Director. I ended up getting that and moving to Connecticut. That was the start of my professional career with the YMCA."

Right Calls at the Right Time

Five years later, Mann's journey reached the West Coast.

“I got a call from a friend who told me about an associate executive position in South Central Los Angeles,” he said.

In March of 1987, Mann flew from cold and snowy Connecticut to sunny L.A. for the interview. While there that week, the young adventure-seeker experienced west coast beaches and even a Lakers-Celtics basketball game.

“When I got the offer, I was, like, ‘*When do I start?*’,” he laughed. “With everything I owned again packed in my car, I shipped it to the west coast and stayed at a fraternity brother’s house for three weeks before I’d saved enough money for my own apartment.”

Mann made an immediate impression on nearly everyone he met in southern California.

“The first time I met Eric, I knew he was a good leader,” said Norm Cross, who first met Eric in L.A. in 1986. “It was something people could tell just by the way he handled himself.”

“When Eric started at the L.A. YMCA, he distinguished himself with everyone right away, because he’s so likeable,” said Larry Rosen, who held a senior position at the YMCA in L.A. throughout the ‘80s. “He’s a lifelong learner. He didn’t get into those jobs because he felt he knew more than everyone else. He came in as a student, humble about acquiring knowledge. He was someone able to adapt to a variety of circumstances, all while keeping an eye on the visionary prize.”

After working in Los Angeles as a branch executive for five years, Mann’s adventurous itch for another opportunity returned.

“I’d gotten married to a woman from North Carolina and I was from Georgia,” he explained. “We wanted to get back to the Southeast.”

In 1991, Mann’s pursuit of a VP branch executive position at the Harris YMCA in Charlotte, N.C. didn’t work out – initially. What did, though, was a VP position with a YMCA in Cincinnati, Ohio.

“Moving from L.A. to Cincinnati in November probably wasn’t the ideal transition time,” Mann laughed. “I had a two-year-old and a wife stuck in the house all winter. It was tough, but we got settled, made some great friends and spent four years there.”

When he was about to sign on the dotted line for a position at the Baltimore YMCA, Eric received a call from an executive at the Charlotte YMCA he had befriended when initially pursuing the North Carolina job. Though there wasn’t a specific job opening at the time, the impact Mann had made during his previous interview in Charlotte resulted in Andy Calhoun simply wanting Mann on board with his Harris YMCA.

“That was another pivotal moment in my career,” Mann said. “I became a chief operator of one of the largest and most progressive YMCAs in the country. Faith was also a big part of the role, which

was important to me. My wife loved being closer to her parents and I was closer to Georgia. Our daughter started grade school in Charlotte.”

Growth and success in Charlotte ensued. According to Eric, Charlotte was growing fast and the YMCA’s expansion was indicative of that growth.

“I call Eric the ‘Nick Fury of the YMCA’,” laughed Michael DeVaul, who first met Eric in Charlotte. “He was always the guy behind the scenes with the power of influence. He’s a leader who exudes humility. I always tell people the most important skills we need today are compassion and accountability. Eric exudes both of those qualities.”

“We grew big YMCAs in Charlotte, which resulted in an Eric Mann brand, of sorts, in terms of what I was really good at and what I understood about a YMCA’s marketing, growth and membership,” Mann said.

Despite a number of calls with offers for other jobs in other cities, Mann and his family were happy in Charlotte.

But that didn’t stop other YMCA leaders from pursuing him.

Learning to Lead at a Higher Level

“A mentor of mine nearing retirement - the CEO of a Pittsburgh YMCA - kept calling,” Mann recalled. “The seventh time he called, I agreed to a meeting. My wife, Nita, and I went to visit in December. After Nita returned home a few days later, I met with the volunteers and search committee, who made me a very nice offer as CEO. I went home the next day and told Nita we were going to Pittsburgh. I was 44, which was young to be a CEO of a large YMCA.”

Above all else, what that eight-year stint beginning in 2003 provided Mann was the opportunity to lead at a different level. It’s one thing to be a chief operator, but as the CEO with a great staff and team of volunteers, he learned a lot.

By that time, Mann had zig-zagged across the country, motivated by the intention to grow himself. Part of his mindset shift in Pittsburgh was a change of inspiration. Mann had become primarily driven by a desire to boost the Association’s growth.

“I will long remember that day in Pittsburgh when I met and spent the day with him. I was so impressed and knew then that’s who we needed,” said John Baker, who first met Eric in Pittsburgh when serving on the First Coast YMCA search committee. “People can dream, but it takes a whole different skill set to execute. Eric Mann did both. His vision has been a textbook example of how to succeed, and the neatest part about it is that he’s such a good guy. People absolutely love Eric Mann, me included.”

“God had been taking me places where I needed to be, not where I necessarily wanted to go,” Mann explained of the realization. “That is how I ended up in Jacksonville in 2011.”

Final Stop: First Coast

At the time, the only thing Mann knew about the city of Jacksonville was the annual Georgia-Florida game.

“Even though I didn’t know much about the city at first, I was hoping this would be my career’s final destination,” said Mann. “I was 52 when I started here in 2011 and hoped for a 10-12-year runway before retirement. I felt like Jacksonville was the right size. It had a big-city feel, but was smaller than many of the places I’d worked before. After talking to the volunteers and understanding what the opportunities could be, I knew this was the right place to finish my career.”

Mann did many positive things for the First Coast, he did the renovation of the Johnson Family YMCA in Northwest Jacksonville, including the addition of the state-of-the-art Teen Center and pool, and the construction of the Winston Family YMCA, the association's largest branch. He also Launched Healthy Living Centers open to both members and the public, which provide health screenings and programs on nutrition, healthy aging, heart health, coping with cancer and other topics related to navigating health care. During his time at the YMCA, there was a fundraising growth of 515%!

Mann wasn’t wrong.

“I speak for a lot of people when I say we fell in love with Eric, Branita and Erica the first time we laid eyes on them,” said Eric’s former executive assistant, Suellen Johnson. “Because of Eric, I say with complete honesty that every day in the office was a great day.”

“Eric was the single reason I joined the YMCA,” stated former YMCA Board Member and Chairman, Gary Norcross. “Eric has a leadership humbleness and servant nature that made others want to help and be a part of everything he tried to do.”

“From the moment you meet Eric, you just start to beam in his presence,” said Mike Kelly, who served on the search committee which brought Eric to Jacksonville. “He’s so incredibly charismatic and authentic that it’s a genuine treat to be around him.”

“Certain individuals have a unique ability to connect with people from all walks of life,” said Doug Baer, First Coast YMCA board member who first met Eric when Mann took the Jacksonville job. “Eric was as good as they came with doing just that.”

“Within two years of Eric being at the First Coast YMCA, he knew more people in the community than I did...and I grew up here,” laughed Rusty Newton, who also served on the search committee in Jacksonville.

“Not only is Eric amazing as a person, but the way he led the YMCA was also in an amazing way,” said friend and former First Coast YMCA Metro Board Chair, Darnell Smith. “Eric has been exceptionally exceptional and extraordinarily extraordinary. I wish Eric and his family nothing but happiness as they embark on this next stage of his life...retirement.”

Another familiar assertion is that people should always leave things better than when first encountered. By virtue of choosing to take that route, Eric Mann will be forever encouraged when looking back.

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