

Blake Belden

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Journalistic Experience

Correspondent, *Capital News Service*, Richmond, Va. – Spring 2013

- Reported stories on the Virginia General Assembly for distribution to more than 70 news outlets.
- Communicated with lawmakers, advocates and protestors to cover both sides of legislative issues.
- Published in print and online news organizations throughout the state.

Internship, *Virginia Commonwealth University*, Richmond, Va. – Spring 2013

- Reported stories on important events and achievements of the VCU Business School.
- Formatted stories for online readability.
- Posted finalized content online.
- Featured on the front page of the VCU Business School's website.

Other Experience

Server, *Baker's Crust*, Richmond, Va. – October 2010-October 2012

- Catered to the needs of restaurant patrons.
- Became comfortable with handling multiple tasks in a fast-paced environment.

Education

Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va.

- Graduation date: May 2013
- Major: Mass Communications – Print Journalism
- Dean's List

Skills

- Extensive experience and discipline of writing in AP style.
- In-depth practice with research, fact-checking, and interviewing.
- Versatile writing abilities: multiple beats, features, profiles, event stories, breaking news, creative stories.
- Experience with social networking platforms: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, ScribbleLive.
- Knowledge of website design and content formatting.

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Information systems professors fix computers to help save Brazilian rainforest

by BLAKE BELDEN | MARCH 13, 2013



Two professors at VCU volunteered in Brazil redesigning the computing infrastructure for a non-profit organization whose mission is to restore the rainforest.

George Kasper, professor in information systems, was contacted in the spring of 2012 by Partners of the Americas, a non-profit grassroots network that connects individuals and other organizations on an international level, to see if he wanted to help reconfigure the technological workings of the Iracambi Research Center through USAID's Farmer-To-Farmer program.

Iracambi, based in Minas Gerais, Brazil, is a community of international volunteers who strive for the restoration of the Atlantic Rainforest.

Kasper decided he was interested and recruited the assistance of Manoj Thomas, who is the director of technology for the department of information systems.

"There were a lot of things we had to take care of. The servers had to be rebuilt, desktops had to be rebuilt. We had to redo their [entire] wireless infrastructure," Thomas said.

During two weeks in December, Kasper and Thomas updated the center's servers to Windows Server 2012, renewed and reconstructed the entire local area network (LAN) and installed wireless access points as well as a Cisco switch, which improves LAN operating efficiency.

Christine McCurdy, the program director for Farmer-to-Farmer, said that she recruited Kasper and Thomas for a multitude of reasons including their prior experience, department history and their role as professors to teach the Iracambi community how to continue operating the system on their own.

"[They] ended up being a really great team. I think they complemented one another nicely and brought different expertise and were able to carry out a really successful assignment," McCurdy said.

Binka Le Breton, the Director of Iracambi, expressed Iracambi's satisfaction and appreciation in an email to the Partners of America. Breton said, "Despite diabolical weather and power outages, [Kasper and Thomas] did an amazing job of reorganizing our trashy (and trashed) network, thereabout enabling us to work a hundred times more smoothly."

Minas Gerais lies in the southeastern region of Brazil and ranks as the country's second most populous state. In more recent years, the region's farmers have noticed a decrease in production per acreage. Since Minas Gerais relies heavily on agricultural production, farmers have been tearing down the rainforest to access larger acres of farmable land.

However, destroying the rainforest has many negative consequences including a loss of biodiversity and a decreased supply of freshwater to surrounding regions.

"[Iracambi is] trying to get the community to co-exist with the environment and to promote [the regrowth of]the forest, rather than trying to destroy it for their livelihood," Thomas said.

Created in 1999, The Iracambi Research Center focuses its work in three categories: managing natural resources, developing sustainable communities and researching ecosystems along with how humans impact them.

In a post-operation report to the Iracambi Research Center, Kasper said that, "Information technology is essential to effective implementation and development of each of these three initiatives."

"They need [information technology] because they use it to track what is happening in the ecosystem. [Another] thing they use it for is to submit grants, or submit proposals for grants. They have to have internet access and they have to have a workable computing environment," Kasper said.

In addition to tracking and grants, many of the volunteers are students from other countries, so the internet provides a cheap, convenient form of communication to their friends and families.

"Many of the students there would use Skype to communicate with their parents. They all used Skype for phone because it's incredibly cheap, virtually nothing versus what it would cost if they were making intercontinental phone calls," Kasper said.

Thomas said that the tropical environment makes it difficult to maintain a strong computing infrastructure because of frequent thunderstorms. Stronger connections are necessary to resist constant black-outs from lightning.

Because of their work, Kasper hopes to initiate a stronger connection between Iracambi and VCU. He believes this may open up future possibilities for VCU students to bring their ecological or technological expertise to the organization's cause.

The Partners of the Americas paid for all of the necessary expenses of the trip, however Kasper and Thomas offered their time and work on a purely voluntary basis.

For more information regarding the Iracambi Research Center visit: <http://en.iracambi.com/>

To check out Partners of the Americas, go to: <http://www.partners.net>

For more on the Farmers-To-Farmers program: http://transition.usaid.gov/our_work/agriculture/farmer_to_farmer.htm

Original URL:

<http://wp.vcu.edu/vcubusiness/2013/03/13/information-systems-professors-fix-computers-to-help-save-brazilian-rainforest/>

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Cyclists gear up for next legislative session

by RVANEWS STAFF | MARCH 6, 2013



by RVANews staff

By Blake Belden | Capital News Service

Like a bicyclist who's taken a tumble but stays in the race, Virginia bicycling advocates say they'll push on despite disappointments they suffered during the 2013 legislative session.

During the recently concluded session, the General Assembly killed all legislation to improve bicycle safety in Virginia, including a bill requiring passing cars to give cyclists more room. Michael Gilbert, co-founder of [RideRichmond](#), said the setbacks were more of a wake-up call than a total failure.

"It's not just an easy walk in the park," Gilbert said, "We need to come back and be stronger next year, and make sure that we can make the case ... that this really is a nonpartisan issue."

Charlie Thomas, president of the [Richmond Area Bicycling Association](#), said bicyclists shouldn't be discouraged because bike safety bills failed.

"I see it as a work in progress," Thomas said. "We did go further this year than we have in the past in getting this legislation addressed."

RideRichmond, a nonprofit group of bicycle enthusiasts, hosted its first [Bicycle Action Day](#) on Jan. 29th, during the third week of the legislative session. Bicycle safety advocates pedaled to the Capitol and rallied in support of bills to protect bicyclists from motor vehicles.

To build political support for such measures, it is crucial to inform the public, both bicyclists and motorists, about "share the road" safety issues, bicycling advocates say.

"We have to be very vigilant in communicating and really getting action alerts out across the state, to have constituents speak up and tell their delegates and their senators that they want to see them support this bill or a similar type of legislation," Gilbert said.

Thomas said the most disappointing defeat this legislative session involved [Senate Bill 1060](#), which sought to prohibit motor vehicles from following bicycles, scooters and other vehicles “more closely than is reasonable and prudent.” The bill also would have required cars to give three feet of clearance when they pass a bicycle.

Current Virginia law requires passing motorists to give bicyclists only two feet of clearance. “We are the only state that expressly allows that,” Thomas said.

SB1060, sponsored by Sen. Bryce Reeves (R-Fredericksburg), cleared the Senate but was defeated in the House on a 42-55 vote.

Delegate Alfonso Lopez (D-Arlington), introduced a similar measure in his chamber – [House Bill 1950](#). The House Transportation Committee endorsed it, but the full House refused to take it up.

Lopez said his goal was to bring Virginia into compliance with the Uniform Vehicle Code, a set of motor vehicle laws designed to act as a comprehensive guide for state legislatures across the country. Among other things, the code says bicyclists and motor vehicle operators should have the same rights and responsibilities.

“Virginia needs to improve its traffic laws to conform with the Uniform Vehicle Code and the majority of other states that have these common-sense bicycle safety measures,” Lopez said.

The Uniform Vehicle Code also suggests that it should be unlawful for a motor vehicle’s occupants to open their doors on the side adjacent to moving traffic until it’s “reasonably safe” to do so. This recommendation seeks to save bicyclists from getting hit by car doors.

[SB736](#), sponsored by Sen. Chap Petersen (D-Fairfax) would have made that a law in Virginia. Petersen’s bill passed the Senate but was killed in the House Transportation Committee.

Thomas said some opponents of such legislation may be motivated by the fact that certain bicyclists disobey the current laws.

“I think there is some pushback that not all cyclists exercise courtesy on the road, and I think that may have a bearing,” he said. “There are motorists who comment, ‘Cyclists are not obeying the law, so why give them more?’”

But Thomas believes bicycling advocates can overcome that opposition and get bike safety laws passed.

“I’m more optimistic,” he said. “There’s going to be more cyclists on the road and more of a need to have these laws, and I think they will eventually get passed.”

Gilbert said bicycle safety advocates are not going anywhere.

“We put some good energy in [this session]. We took a lot of lessons learned out of it,” he said.

“We’re down, but we’re not out. We will be back next year.”

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Original URL:

<http://rvanews.com/news/cyclists-gear-up-for-next-legislative-session/85571>

Adopt school safety ideas, governor tells Assembly

FEB. 3, 2013

February 3rd, 2013

Blake Belden

Capital News Service

Gov. Bob McDonnell is urging state legislators to approve recommendations from his School and Campus Safety Task Force that would increase sentences for illegally buying guns, require mandatory lockdown drills at schools and establish more comprehensive suicide prevention programs.

McDonnell sent the General Assembly a letter Friday outlining the panel's initial recommendations.

"I am pleased to report that the task force has provided me with a number of initial recommendations that the members believe will help make our schools and campuses safer," McDonnell wrote. "After reviewing their initial recommendations, I agree that these will help make our schools and campuses more secure."

The letter highlighted 10 recommendations involving public safety (including restoring funding for school resource officers); involving education (such as funding anti-bullying training); and involving mental health (like expanding outpatient services).

"Given the limited time left in session and considering that budget development is already well underway, I am providing you with my thoughts regarding which recommendations should be given your highest consideration and most immediate attention," the governor said.

McDonnell established the task force in the wake of December's school shootings in Newtown, Conn., where a gunman killed 26 people, including 20 children. VCU assistant vice provost of student affairs Charles Klink serves on

the task force.

The task force issued its initial recommendations Thursday.

Under current law, the illegal purchase or transport of firearms is a Class 1 misdemeanor punishable by up to 12 months in jail. The task force's proposal would make this violation a Class 6 felony punishable by up to five years in jail.

For people who enter a school with a firearm or explosive device, the panel suggested that they be sentenced to up to 20 years in jail.

No proposals limit any current laws of legal gun ownership.

The task force also issued recommendations that require more security on the schools' part. For instance, all schools would be required to conduct a lockdown drill within the first 20 days of the fall and spring semester.

The task force also proposed that all schools institute a more in-depth mental health program and suicide prevention activities. Another proposal suggests that teachers undergo training and certification so they can recognize and treat mental or emotional distress among students or other faculty.

The General Assembly has less than a month to turn these recommendations into law. The legislative session is scheduled to end on Feb. 23.

The task force is expected to send the governor another set of recommendations by June 30.

In his letter to the General Assembly, McDonnell said, "I am confident that by working together we will make our schools and campuses safer and improve upon the legal and budgetary framework necessary to help our first responders, education and mental health profession protect all Virginians."

Original URL:

<http://www.commonwealthtimes.org/2013/02/03/adopt-school-safety-ideas-governor-tells-assembly/>