

City Museum staff prepares to carry on without Cassilly - Late founder had encouraged them to follow their own instincts.

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On the desk of City Museum director Rick Erwin sits a wrench and a letter that a little girl dropped off at the museum a few weeks ago. It reads: "Dear Creator of the City Museum. My name is Megan. I found this useful trash. I was walking to my house when I saw something shiny nearby. I picked it up and my mom said, 'You should give that to the City Museum.' So it was my mom's idea to give it to you. I hope you will put it somewhere in the City Museum. Sincerely, Megan. PS I love to recycle! PSS ... I love your museum!"

The note was among the letters, invoices and attendance figures Erwin reviewed with City Museum co-founder Bob Cassilly during their last meeting. Cassilly died about a week later in a bulldozer accident at Cementland, his 55-acre playground.

"It was my job to show him the comments we were getting on Facebook and the letters," Erwin said. "It would drive him nuts when someone would point out something wrong. He would be like, 'OK, well you know, we've got to do it.'"

With winter coming, Cassilly would soon move his crew from Cementland to City Museum, where he wanted to make updates to the mezzanine and third floor. Cassilly had made many recent changes to the ground floor - erecting a sprawling indoor tree house from trees salvaged from a cemetery; hollowing out the white whale for new tunnels and a slide. Now he wanted to add more tunnels, find a use for beautiful basketball-court flooring in Toddler Town and complete the seven-story outdoor spiral staircase from MonstroCity to the roof.

And the fire truck sitting outside, well, something needed to be done with that, too.

"We walked around the entire museum," Erwin said. "We've already started on some of the projects. We are going to complete Bob's work."

Of that, there is no doubt. Erwin says the staff, Cassilly's family and co-owner David Jump are committed to keeping the City Museum open. But the attraction's long-term success depends largely on Erwin, a details guy who excelled at executing his boss' wishes but still is learning to stand on his own.

"Whenever I would try to think like him, he would tell me that that was my downfall," said Erwin, 35. "He said, if I think like him then I'm going to question myself. I should do what I want to do."

Cassilly hired Erwin in 2006 to take care of the day-to-day tasks he couldn't be bothered with - checking employee references, paying utilities, fielding calls from folks with junk to unload. With a graduate degree in arts administration from Art Institute of Chicago, Erwin seemed qualified for the job, but he constantly asked himself, "What would Bob do?"

Erwin did implement some policies of his own, such as an injury protocol. Whenever visitors bump their heads in the Enchanted Caves or twist an ankle on MonstroCity, Erwin documents the injury and follows up with the family. He also checks that exhibits are safe, though he says Cassilly seemed to take more care in recent years.

"I would not even get to something, and he would say, 'Look what I did.' He would have shaved the corners and rounded the edges," Erwin said.

But a big part of Erwin's job has been personal assistant. He told the staff what Cassilly wanted and told Cassilly when he had meetings. (Cassilly didn't check email and was known to lose his cellphone.) Erwin even made sure Cassilly got fed.

"If Bob was ever having a pissy day, I would make sure he had an ice cream Snickers bar and a Gatorade, and then he was good to go," Erwin said.

In return, Cassilly taught Erwin how to work with concrete, gave him time off to attend his pregnant wife's doctor appointments and offered book recommendations, the most recent being "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed" by Jared Diamond.

"He truly was the most generous person I ever met," Erwin said.

Cassilly also gave Erwin confidence, a quality he'll need as leads the city's most unusual attraction forward. The museum draws 600,000 visitors annually and employs 150 workers in the summer. Erwin says the City Museum must continue to add new artifacts and build new

attractions or it will turn into Cassilly's greatest fear: a respectable museum.

The staff supports Erwin who, like his boss, possesses a boyish sense of wonder and a tendency to mumble, though not Cassilly's mercurial temper.

"If anyone can do it, it's Rick," said Travis Morgan, who has worked at the museum three years.

A bigger challenge may be corralling the ideas and egos of Cassilly's many collaborators. Cassilly may have been the museum's leader, but he was not its sole mastermind. Over the years, Cassilly amassed a crew of mad geniuses and misfits who were as creative as their mentor and perhaps just as crazy.

"There will probably be a select few who are going to decide this is how we're going to do it," Erwin said. "Even before, Bob didn't make all of the decisions. He gave us the principles and then the freedom to make our own decisions. I was getting to the point with him where I was learning to ask for forgiveness and not permission. He taught me well."

• **Caption:** Photo - Erwin Photo by J.B. FORBES file photo • jforbes@post-dispatch.com Bob Cassilly balances on top of a 60-foot-tall water tank on the roof of his City Museum in September 1997 as he was getting the attraction ready to open. Cassilly insisted that he wanted to have his photo taken on top of the tower.

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