

The Buffalo Story

by Robert F. Graboyes
University of Richmond

On the first day of classes, I ask each student to “tell the class the single most interesting fact about you.” The stories can be impressive, hilarious, inspiring, bizarre, heartwarming. Some survived difficult births or childhood illnesses. One student’s ancestor was sentenced to death in Britain and then went on to successful military and political careers in the U.S. One was descended from a well-known nursery rhyme character. Others have skydived, traveled extensively, played golf with sports or music legends, or come from huge families. Some describe the careers of their dreams.



Somewhere on that first day, the students often ask the same question of me. Occasionally, I mention the following: [1] The pleasant afternoon I spent at the apartment of a Beatle. [2] The night that machine gun-wielding soldiers ordered a driver and me to transport a woman in labor along a desolate West African road to a distant hospital. [3] The number of continents, countries, and states I’ve visited. [4] The movie I was in. [5] The inebriated woman who insisted that I was Dustin Hoffman and demanded an autograph. [6] Some unforgettable astronomical, biological, cultural, and historical events I’ve witnessed firsthand.

Most often, my response is this: “I once had to choose between getting married and being trampled to death by a buffalo on the plains of East Africa. I chose marriage and have been extremely happy with the choice in the decades since.” I won’t explain the story here, since that would spoil it for future audiences. But in honor of the story, my wife’s friend and colleague, Brenda Thornton, made the jigsaw puzzle seen here.

Every life includes some interesting stories, and I advise students to keep a couple of theirs in mind at all times. In job interviews, graduate school visits, or chance encounters with opportunity, a good story or two can provide the edge over equally qualified candidates. Sometimes, a student calls me for a letter of recommendation three or four years after taking my class. Having had around 2,000 people go through my classes, it’s sometimes tough for me to put a face with a name. The best such calls begin with the student giving his or her name and me responding with, “I remember. You were the one whose most interesting fact was ... “