The Power to Change People's Lives

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Last month I mentioned that I set up a quick and dirty website for my high school's 25th reunion. The reunion weekend was last weekend, and the experience brought forth a reminder about what it is we do for a living.

As I said last month, it wasn't a big deal. The main page had information about the reunion weekend, and along the side were links for pages out of the yearbook. Clicking on one of those links brought up a dozen graduation pictures; clicking on one of the pictures displayed a page with the ability to enter biographical info like address, email address, hobbies, kids, spouse, job, hobbies, college, and an edit window for other miscellaneous info. There was also a pointer to an image – space for a recent photo of the graduate, their spouse, kids, or (in a couple of cases, pets), or a one by one white pixel placeholder. Behind this, obviously, was just a single DBF with 330 records – one for each member of the graduating class in 1976.

The page with the dozen graduate pictures was dynamically generated, with captions for 'date last updated' and 'recent photo available' so people could see which graduates had visited the site and entered or updated their info.

There were also a couple of other links on the main page that did dynamic queries from the 330 record table – a geographical listing of graduates, a list of recently updated bios, a list of who was going to be attending the reunion dinner, and a page that listed missing graduates.

All in all, this was a very simple FoxPro/Web Connection – one that you wouldn't even admit to working on to another programmer. It took maybe a day to put together the Web Connection stuff, including all the putsy stuff about sizing the pictures properly, getting captions aligned, making sure field sizes were big enough for the variety of data people wanted to enter, and so on. No big deal.

To programmers like you and me, that is.

But to the 300 members of the class, it was a different story. Over a period of about 3 ½ months, about 190 classmates visited the website and updated their bios, and generated over 65,000 Web Connection hits, plus another 45,000 static page views. (OK, maybe a few of these folks don't have a life, but still…)

Approximately a third of the class attended the dinner; together with spouses, there were about 200 people in attendance. In addition, another 25 or so came to 4th of July festivities during the middle of the week, another 75 crammed into a local pub Friday night for an 'impromptu' gathering, and groups of golfers and joggers got together Saturday morning.

But those are just the statistics. The real story was how people reconnected after not seeing each other for 25 years. As I wandered around after dinner, I must have had a dozen people seek me out to tell me that they wouldn't have come to the reunion but for the website – that either the reunion looked so personal and interesting, or that they saw that someone else was going, and they wanted to see that person, or something.

The set of bios, including email addresses, set off a flurry of correspondence between people who had lost touch. Two people who had been best friends in 4th grade, but then split off into separate schools, and never quite connected once back in high school – they started emailing in March, and have renewed their friendship from nearly 35 years ago.

A group of four women who have been scattered to the four corners of the country got together for a lunch that stretched out to four hours – as each told their life story, shared stories about husbands, kids, divorces, memories of the past and thoughts of the future.

The feared backfield from one of the elementary schools all got together and relived the glory days – and then swapped stories about their kids – giving each other hard times about various offspring playing sissy sports like 'soccer' and 'hockey.'

A close friend of mine lost her younger brother a dozen years ago, and is now alone in dealing with the failing health of her parents. Catching up with other graduates who are in the same situation has started to help her out of the spiral of doom and depression she's found herself in.

And there was the couple from high school who, by a twist of fate, hadn't seen each other since mid senior year – over 25 years ago. They connected as soon as the website went up, and over the last few months, fell in love again and they're now planning their future together. Their next 50 years – their lives – have completely changed.

All this from a simple 330 record table website. So the next time you start a new project, step back for a second. Sure, maybe this doesn't apply to your 20th inventory application or yet another payroll module, but consider that some of the work you do may have a significant, profound effect on others that you didn't realize.