



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2015-16 Entry Form

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Taking on House Bill 2

Date(s) of publication? March 29, 2016, April 10, 2016, April 14, 2016, April 19, 2016 and April 24, 2016.

Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Above 50,000 circulation.

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved.

Our state legislature and governor rushed through, in one day, a discriminatory bill aimed at LGBT people and got the governor to sign it the same day. Big, costly boycotts against our state started almost immediately. We started hammering hard at the new law, a solution in search of a problem. We noted that by mandating which public bathrooms transgender people must use, the governor and legislature were simply trying to rev up their base for the 2016 election. We noted all the law's faults, including that it goes far beyond bathrooms in discrimination and in telling cities and counties what they can do. We received a lot of criticism and at least one reader cancelled his subscription, but many others backed us. Thanks to our work and those of other newspapers in our state, the governor is trying to walk this bad legislation back. We'll keep working until this wrongheaded law is rescinded.

Opinion

Applying Calpurnia's lesson to the 21st century

Here are a couple of sights that are becoming so rare they're worth noting: A man opening a car door for a lady. A man opening the door of a house or business for a lady and letting her walk in first, instead of walking in first himself, leaving her to drag behind.

These aren't little things, although I am sure they'll appear chauvinistic to some. But these manners, along with others that might apply equally to both sexes, are steps, if done right for all, that can mean a lot in a country and state increasingly losing its grip on civility. We could learn from a certain lesson in "To Kill a Mockingbird." More on that in a bit.

Manners have always been a first step toward civility, a step that must be followed with action. That last clause is important, for in our South the beauty of civility has too often been undergirded by the brutality of incivility, an ugly and ironic practice we inherited from our main mother country, England. Smile in their face, baby.

That irony is one of many points the Tidewater author William Styron drives home in his first novel, the 1951 masterpiece "Lie Down in Darkness." He set right much of what "Gone with the Wind" got wrong when it inadvertently showed chivalry's ugly side. Margaret Mitchell's book and the movie was so right on its love story that many Southerners didn't get how dead wrong it was on its history. I'm sure no expert on manners. But I

do try to apply what my parents, especially my mother, taught me. My gentle mother keeps trying to teach me manners. Early on, she told me about how our first president, George Washington (a *Virginian*, she always emphasizes), painstakingly taught himself manners, copying the many lessons down in a notebook. It's worth noting that Washington freed most of his slaves in his will, a radical step in his time.

Thanks to my mother, I reflexively put one hand in my lap when I sit down

to eat and always try to keep my mouth closed while eating. I cover my mouth when I cough. And I always address my elders, and often my peers, as "yes sir" and "no sir." I try to listen carefully before speaking, a valuable trait in newspapering, although I often fall far short of the mark.

Such manners can at least slow us down and make us more considerate of others. We should, of course, recognize while carrying them out that there is a big difference between "gentility" and "gentleness," because the other terrible irony about manners, at least in the bad old days of the South, is that they were meant to be practiced only among people who considered each other equal.

While there are plenty of stories about Southerners who treated poor whites and blacks with manners and followed that with action, there's a lot more history about that not happening, from blacks



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Maybe more of us need to learn the manners lessons Scout Finch received.

being lynched to blacks being relegated to the back of the bus. The awful trick of the Old South, from plantation owners to Jim Crow governors, was courteously defending all kinds of discrimination.

The discrimination pattern continues in the South, and in our state, to this day as our governor and legislature continued, at least until late last week, to stubbornly, and for the most part civilly, defend the uncivil House Bill 2, that overreaching solution in search of a problem that uncivilly discriminates against LGBT people, most notoriously by mandating what public bathrooms transgender people must use.

It's past time to take manners forward, backing them with action.

My bottom line, about manners and

so much else, draws from The Golden Rule: We're all guests of each other in this world, and we should treat each other as such and as equals. If a woman doesn't want me to open the door for her, I won't, as much as I want to.

Nelle Harper Lee, the author of the Depression-era novel "To Kill a Mockingbird," knew that Golden Rule well. When Scout Finch rebukes and shames her poor white dinner guest, Walter Cunningham, for dousing his meal in molasses, wondering what "the sam hill he was doing," the Finch's black maid, Calpurnia, soundly scolds her, telling her he's their company and "if he wants to eat up the table cloth, you let him, you hear?"

Who hears that lesson now? We are all guests in this world.