



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

Faced with a school board closing ranks over a secret effort to oust a popular and respected superintendent, The Baytown Sun used its role as the community's voice to play a major part in saving the job of the leader of the 23,000-student district.

The Sun's editorials came down hard on Goose Creek CISD board members.

After a series of stories and editorials, the school board finally began listening to the community.

As a result, the head of the district was given a contract extension and board members who had a hand in this mess face an uneasy road to re-election in May as several challengers announced candidacies.

Many of our readers were pleased the paper was willing to keep attacking the issue on the editorial page. Several pointed out that it shows that the paper is not afraid to take on elected officials.

OUR VIEW

Superintendent
future in limbo

The Goose Creek school board has created a lot of questions with their decision to leave Superintendent O’Brien’s contract in limbo. His contract expires in June, and board members are being cagey about his future.

It’s hard to imagine how starting a new school year with a lame-duck superintendent will benefit anyone. Not to mention the new school year being the district’s centennial year — a year that will see new school boundaries for high schools, new school start times, enhanced campus security and a vital bond issue on the horizon. And let’s not forget the ongoing recovery from Hurricane Harvey and the damage it caused.

Is the board planning another expensive superintendent search?

What is the basis for this decision?

O’Brien has made progress building morale within the district and is respected by teachers, staff members and parents, and by many community members. Those with complaints are few.

But some school board members think differently, apparently.

That would explain why they are purposefully slow-walking a decision on O’Brien’s contract.

Sun reporter Matt Hollis polled board members whether they would vote to extend O’Brien’s contract. Of the seven members, only four replied (Jeers to Howard Sampson, Richard Clem and Ben Pape for ignoring our request.) Board members Al Richard, Pete Pape and Agustin Loreda would not commit to keeping O’Brien, saying only “the process” continues.

Only board member Jessica Woods was brave enough to say she would vote to extend O’Brien’s contract.

From what we hear, O’Brien is popular with students, faculty, staff and the public. Community leaders have implored board members to keep him. Even Baytown’s popular mayor weighed in with his support for O’Brien.

Hired by then-superintendent Salvador Cavazos, O’Brien joined Goose Creek CISD as the deputy superintendent for administrative services in 2013. He became superintendent in 2015 after Cavazos was forced out. O’Brien received a contract extension in 2016. Last year, he received a 2 percent raise, increasing his salary to \$249,000. What has changed since his raise last year?

The superintendent and trustees have pressing matters to address in the coming months. Continuing to delay a decision on the superintendent’s future is not going to improve Goose Creek schools.

The Goose Creek board should recognize O’Brien’s strengths and drop any notion of pushing him out as superintendent — or make their case for a new superintendent immediately and publicly.

— David Bloom

AP FACT CHECK: Trump & NATO

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump shook things up on his trip to Europe, making statements on NATO meant to provoke, and they did. Accuracy was not always a hallmark of these pronouncements.

TRUMP: “Many countries in NATO, which we are expected to defend, are not only short of their current commitment of 2% (which is low), but are also delinquent for many years in payments that have not been made. Will they reimburse the U.S.?”

THE FACTS: There is no such debt to the U.S. or to NATO. Therefore, no delinquency or question of payment.

He is referring to how much each NATO country spends on its own defense and pressing them to spend more. Doing so would relieve some pressure on U.S. military spending. But there are no IOUs to collect from past years.

In 2014, before Trump was president, NATO members agreed to stop cutting their military budgets and set a goal of moving “toward” spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on their own defense — by 2024. It was not a “commitment,” not a direct contribution to NATO, not a payment owed to the U.S., and not something that alliance members pledged to achieve immediately.

Trump has assailed NATO members such as Germany for lagging on their military budgets while he has simultaneously taken credit for progress on that front. He has repeatedly claimed that because of his pressure, “billions and billions of dollars are pouring in,” which is also not true, because there is no such fund for money to pour into.

Baytown Sun Survey

Last week, readers were asked, “Can you be close friends with someone of the opposite political party?”

Yes
71.1%
No
16.7%
Don't care
12.2%

This week’s question: “Which is more important, imposing tariffs on imports from foreign countries to protect certain US industries or maintaining good relations with countries that have been close allies of the US?” Respond at www.baytownsun.com

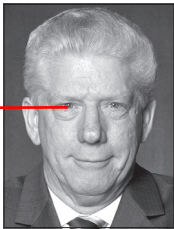
GRADcafe - open for business

Lee College has always been on the lookout for individuals in search of their path forward.

For nearly 85 years, Lee College has been the preferred provider of postsecondary education for residents of Baytown, Highlands and our surrounding communities. The College does not take this responsibility lightly. Connecting people to education and training, through to transferring to a university or employment, is the hallmark of Lee College’s heritage.

The College has been, and always will be, the college of the community.

We are so excited to have another vehicle through which we can connect residents with education, transfer and employment. Known as GRADcafe, this marvelous outreach to the community is now open for business. It is the second such program in the greater Houston area, with the first café college residing in Houston at the Carnegie Neighborhood Library. GRADcafe is a partnership with Project Grad



DENNIS BROWN

in partnership with Project Grad Houston.

Financial support for GRADcafe has been provided by Project Grad Houston, the Temple Foundation, the JP Morgan Chase Foundation and the Fondren Foundation. We are indebted to these organizations for their support.

For many people, stepping onto a college campus can be intimidating. GRADcafe make that step possible in an informal and friendly manner. You can have a cup of coffee, talk with a Gradcafe adviser, and learn about what your options are for your future.

Houston, whose mission is to assist individuals improve their lives by helping them achieve their educational aspirations. We could not be prouder to be the second site, nor could we be prouder to be

A visit to GRADcafe can be life changing. There is no better time than now to get connected with your future. The path is clear. It begins with GRADcafe

GRADcafe is located inside Lee College’s Center for Workforce and Community Education, at 909 Decker (the intersection of Decker Drive/Market Street and Texas Avenue). It is right across the parking lot from the City of Baytown’s Sterling Public Library. Hours of operation are Tuesday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Friday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Come as you are!

It is time for you to take hold of your future. Do not wait for your future to find you, be proactive and find your future. There is no better time than now. The coffee is brewing, and your cup is waiting. All services, including the coffee, are free.

Dr. Dennis Brown is president of Lee College.



Is ‘No Straw’ law headed for Houston?

Perhaps you’re not aware, but the City of Seattle, which is located in Washington state (or maybe it’s Wyoming), has passed a new law that, from this day forward, forbids the use of drinking straws.

This is true so help me Baytown Police Chief Keith Dougherty. No drinking straws? I say it’s about doggone time.

Forget that last paragraph, which sits there just above this one. I was fibbing.

Truth is, I think the law is stupid. It makes me want the Astros to beat the Mariners even more than I normally would.

But hold on. Now I see where there is an Anti-Straw Movement in Houston. Really.

Now then, if you are arrogantly seen drinking your soda pop through a straw in Seattle, you are subject to a fine of \$250. (I’m surprised they didn’t call for the death penalty on second offenses. Or did they?)

I saw this dumb story recently. It was written by Cleve R. Wootson Jr., who works for the Washington Post. In case you don’t know, the Washington Post is located in Washington D.C. and not in the State of Washington, although both have something in common. Both places are totally insane.

Why, you must be wondering, did Seattle think such a law was necessary? I’ll let Cleve R. Wootson Jr. tell you.

It’s “an environmentally friendly move that leaders hope will spark national conversation about small, everyday changes that people can make to protect the planet.

“A decade ago, the city adopt-



JIM FINLEY

ed an ordinance requiring that one-time-use food items be compostable or recyclable, according to the Seattle Times. But straws and other cutlery were exempted from that law because there were

not many good alternatives.

“So the straws stayed, along with the environmental problems they cause.”

Personally, I didn’t know straws were that big of an impediment to the environment? I guess you can learn something every day.

Cleve R. Wootson Jr. also reported that the Strawless Ocean campaign [whatever that is] “estimates 71 percent of seabirds and 30 percent of turtles have plastic in their stomachs, which can cut their mortality rate in half.”

I may not be as smart as the Strawless Ocean organization, but I do wonder how Strawless Ocean officials know that 71 percent of seabirds have plastic in their tummies? Do they schedule appointments with the birds and do MRIs?

And those poor turtles. Is this really just an environmental “shell” game?

Here’s what really burned my backside. As Cleve R. Wootson Jr. explained, “Now customers at grocery stores, restaurants, food trucks, even institutional cafeterias [whatever that means], have to find another way to get liquid into their mouths.”

That paragraph really stung

because after I caught The Cancer and underwent surgery, it left the right side of my face semi-paralyzed. Thusly, everything I drink is through one of those dastardly straws.

Matters not what I ingest — soda pop, tea, beer, Glaceau vitamin water, etc. — ol’ Jimbo needs a straw. I haven’t had a cup of coffee in 8 years because I would look super-dumb sitting at Cracker Barrel drinking coffee through a straw.

Worse yet, some mental health official might see me and haul me away.

I must confess that at the bottom of Cleve R. Wootson Jr.’s article it says this: “People who have a medical need to use a straw are exempt.”

That made me feel a smidgen better. That was great thinking on the part of Seattle officials. If I ever get to Seattle, which I have no desire to do, I will personally go to city hall and thank them.

But that begs this question: Where will medically exempt humanoids FIND a straw? The Black Market? An illegal Straw Cartel?

And will people like me have to carry their own straws? Where? In their pockets? Behind their ears? Will they need a “Straw ID” card?

And now this environmental push may be coming to Houston, which, the last I looked, is next door to Baytown?

Is Baytown next?
Then College Station?
AAARRGHHH!

Jim Finley is a retired managing editor of The Sun. He can be reached at viewpoints@baytownsun.com, Attention: Jim Finley.

OUR VIEW

Save the
superintendent,
oust the board

Despite all the denials from board members, there is a real push to get rid of Goose Creek CISD Superintendent Randal O'Brien.

All signs indicate that a majority of the Board of Trustees are ready to vote to buyout and/or not renew the superintendent's contract or fire him outright on Monday night.

Board member Jessica Woods is the only board member to say publicly that Mr. O'Brien should stay on as superintendent. The others, at least the ones unafraid to speak up, have deflected questions and have not been truthful.

As to why the board is looking to remove the popular administrator, who knows? They aren't talking, except for scheming among themselves.

This is outrageous. Baytown and Highlands children, parents, and taxpayers deserve better.

They deserve to know where each member stands on the decision, for starters. And they deserve to know what should lead to Mr. O'Brien's ouster.

Is it the failure of the school system to raise academic performance? If so, how will Mr. O'Brien's leaving improve the situation?

Did Mr. O'Brien commit some sort of infraction or fall short of some yardstick that the public doesn't know about? If the board has a good reason to give him the boot, disclosing it would allay suspicion.

Is Mr. O'Brien being offered up as a sacrificial goat because the district's \$437.5 million bond failed?

Finally, what kind of candidate does the board expect to apply for the job after treating the incumbent this way?

There is no indication that the public and district staff has soured on his leadership. In truth, Mr. O'Brien's popularity has grown since he took over for Salvador Cavazos in 2014.

When Mr. O'Brien was appointed interim superintendent after the community forced Cavazos out, things in Goose Creek were extremely strained and morale was very low.

The school board apparently refuses to acknowledge any of the positive successes in our district since then, or recognize that teachers, students and schools have flourished since those dark days.

The way the board is going about this decision—closed-door meetings and with no explanation—is intolerable.

There might well be solid reasons for the school board to want a new superintendent.

But the public is being left in the dark about why, and officials are hiding behind the "it's a personnel matter" cloak. Technically, hiring anybody is a personnel matter, but a publicly elected board must tell the public why it is hiring and firing a superintendent of a public school district.

The only way for the board to redeem itself is to explain itself. And it had better do so thoroughly—and fast, lest these board members be the next ones out the door.

So what can you do?

From now until Monday night, it's absolutely vital that your voices be heard. Tell your elected representatives how you feel. Vent. Show up at the meeting Monday night and show your support for Mr. O'Brien.

Then, vote. The next election is in May and there are three trustees on the ballot.

Let them know that their votes on Monday will be a determining factor in your support come election time.

We can improve the school board by finding and supporting candidates for those positions who are realists and who understand the business of education. Unopposed candidates—and we've had a few—clearly do not ensure capable school board members.

Here are the valves through which you can vent your steam at Goose Creek CISD school board:

howard.sampson@gccisd.net
agustin.loredo@gccisd.net
jessica.woods@gccisd.net
Richard.Clem@gccisd.net
Ben.Pape@gccisd.net
al.richard@gccisd.net
pete.pape@gccisd.net

And if board members are uninterested and don't want to answer any questions from the public, voters should spare them that ordeal in the future.

—David Bloom

TODAY IN HISTORY

On this date:

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail from Palos, Spain, on a voyage that took him to the present-day Americas.

In 1958, the nuclear-powered submarine USS Nautilus became the first vessel to cross the North Pole underwater.

In 1972, the U.S. Senate ratified the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union. (The U.S. withdrew from the treaty in 2002.)

In 1981, U.S. air traffic controllers went on strike, despite a warning from President Ronald Reagan they would be fired, which they were.

In 1987, the Iran-Contra congressional hearings ended, with none of the 29 witnesses tying President Ronald Reagan directly to the diversion of arms-sales profits to Nicaraguan rebels.

Thought for Today: "Many of us spend half of our time wishing for things we could have if we didn't spend half our time wishing."

—Alexander Woolcott, American critic (1887-1943)

Macaroni the cat at it again ...

I live such an exciting life. I actually spent part of my weekend emptying out recorded shows on my VCR. Typically, I tape lots of sports, cooking, outdoor type shows.

The wife tapes one show, General Hospital. I can't stand to watch TV unless it's a live sports event, otherwise I just tape everything else and skip through the commercials.

I was dumping out lots of old sports events when I suddenly ran into a slew of Mexican soap operas that someone had recorded. The show comes on at 2 p.m. when no one is home and it's called "El vuelo de la Victoria."

No clue what it's about.

I thought it was some kind of fluke that my cable got hung up or something like that. There were 26 one-hour episodes of this show. I wondered if the wife was taping them for



LANNY GRIFFITH

a Mexican soap opera and we both just looked at each other. Twenty-six hours of Mexican soap operas had been taped.

No wonder the VCR kept telling us we were running out of space. So, I sat there deleting all those shows.

Later that week I flew home to grab something and the upstairs TV was on and the cat was sleeping at the foot of our bed where she always

some odd reason as no one in our house speaks Spanish, so I asked her when she came in and she gave me that look that a wife gives the husband when she thinks he's crazy.

So, we flipped on the show and sure enough, it was a Mexican soap opera and we both

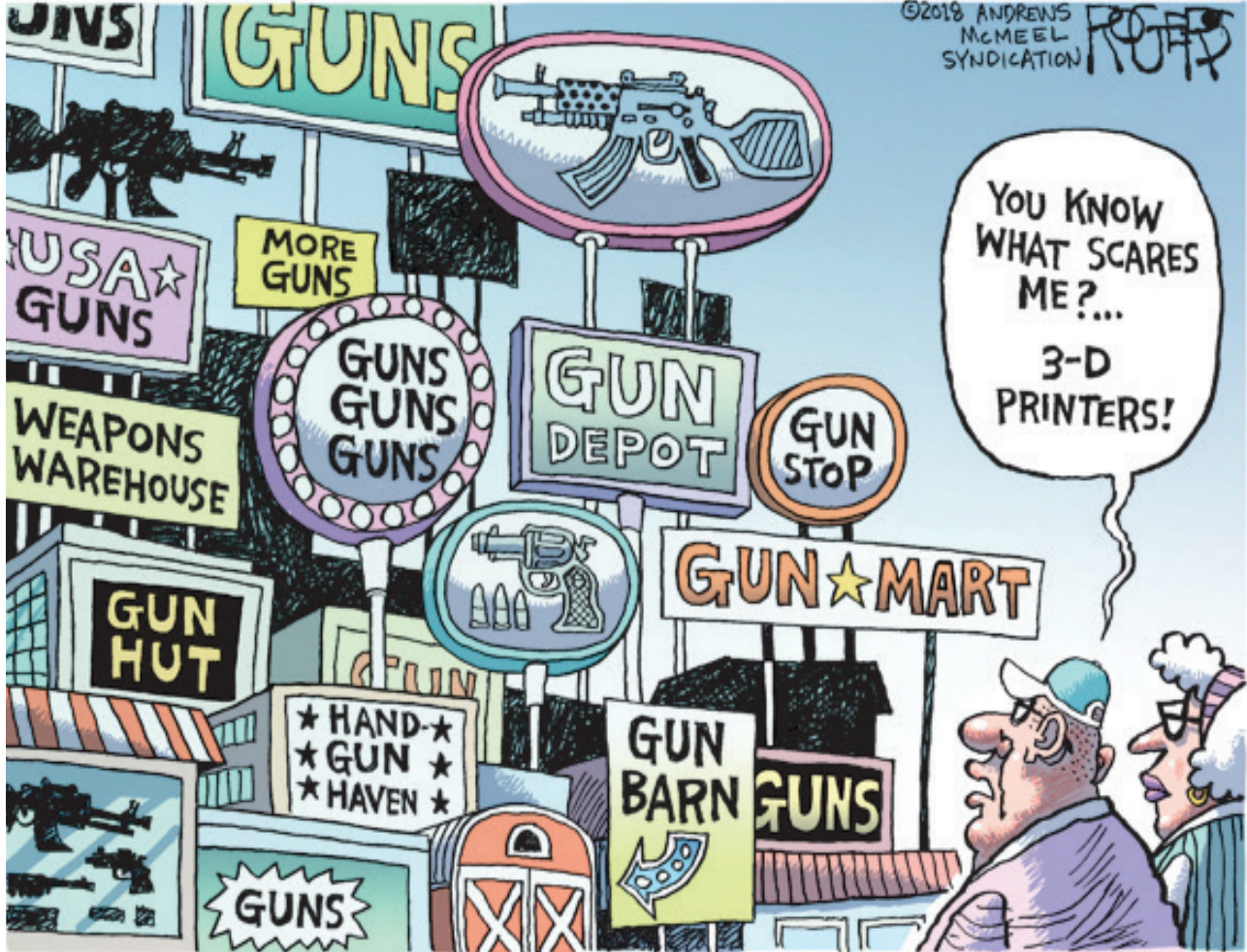
naps. I looked for the remote control to turn off the TV and it turns out Macaroni was sleeping on top of the remote control.

She is so weird. I noticed she loves to sleep on our cell phones so now she is sleeping on the remote controls too.

My assumption is Macaroni, our cat takes her 2 p.m. nap on of the remote control and accidentally turns it on and hits the record button to "El vuelo de Victoria."

It's bad enough I got her sticking her snout in my wine goblet, now she's drinking wine, and watching Mexican soap operas while we are at work. Crazy cat.

Lanny Griffith is an REL graduate and media mogul. Contact him at lgriffith11@gmail.com.



Republican midterm fear rising

From time to time, I've been catching up with a Republican strategist who is trying to help the GOP keep control of the House in this November's midterm elections. It's been an up-and-down ride.

"I would put the odds of keeping the House at exactly 50-50," he told me in January.

"I get how bad things seemingly are," he said during a particularly tumultuous time in April. "But if the election were today, I'd bet my son's college tuition we'd keep the House."

He was even more confident by June. "We keep the House," he told me. "I'd bet a lot of money on that."

And now: "The last 30 days have been really bad. I really wouldn't want to have the election today."

Looking back, each change in the strategist's mood has been the result of whatever President Trump was doing at that particular moment. His current anguish is the product of what he called "30 days of sh-t." By that, he meant the period of time beginning with Trump's decision to separate families crossing illegally into the United States and ending with his performance at the Helsinki summit.

Both hurt Republicans, the strategist said, but probably the Trump-Putin summit hurt more. When the president met with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, he said, many Republican-targeted voters saw a certain method in the madness. It actually helped GOP candidates. But when Trump met Vladimir Putin, those voters didn't see the method part.

If the past is any lesson, memories will fade. But the problem going forward is that as future Trumpian incidents occur, Republicans will have less and less time to recover before Nov. 6.

"The next couple of weeks/months are critical in that we have had peaks and valleys before, but



BYRON YORK

is the relationship between presidential job approval and the House GOP's re-election chances. It's often observed that Trump is keeping the favor of his base supporters. He is. But Republican strategists are watching his approval sink in some educated, affluent congressional districts with lots of independent voters the party needs to hold the House.

That undoubtedly hurts Republican candidates. "The Trump numbers, I don't know what to make of," said another GOP strategist working on the midterms. "It's not that his job approval ratings are good -- they're not good -- but we're not sure what role they play."

The second GOP strategist pointed to the economy, a subject of lots of undeniably good news. But whatever happy stories there are about growth and the stock market, he said, "It's still income and wages."

"With over half the country living paycheck-to-paycheck, the question for them is, is there enough improvement occurring that they can see themselves beginning to break out of that paycheck-to-paycheck cycle? If the answer is yes, that's a positive environment for Republicans. If the answer is no, then they (voters) are going to be willing to rock the boat again. I don't believe they have reached a conclusion yet."

Right now, the RealClearPolitics average of polls has Democrats up about 7 percentage points in the so-called generic ballot question, which asks which party a voter

they always got fixed," the strategist said. "The fear is that we're running out of time and maybe they won't get fixed."

plans to choose for his or her representative in Congress. Many Republican strategists would feel comfortable about keeping the House if the Democratic poll lead were kept to 4, or perhaps 5, points.

"Most of the data would lead a sober person to expect control of the House to be a 50-50 proposition, maybe a little worse for Republicans," said a third GOP strategist. "But most of the data at this time last election cycle led most of the pundits to celebrate President Hillary Clinton. I'm starting to think that this could be another instance where the group-think is wrong."

Maybe. But Republicans face a huge task. In a way, there has already been a wave in this election. It is the wave of 42 Republicans leaving the House. It's a record number, and there's no way to spin it as optimism for the future.

Still, all three strategists are keeping hope alive. Even the first strategist, rattled after those 30 bad days, sees the problems of the Democratic Party and remembers that Nancy Pelosi -- just saying the name -- is a great motivator for Republicans to get to the polls. Put that together with the Democrats who have embraced the unpopular issue of abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and that's a party a lot of voters do not want to embrace.

So GOP victory remains possible. What Republicans would like now is the absence of noise and distraction coming from the White House.

"We just need a decent level of calmness so we can message," said the first strategist. "If we could just have calmness, we could talk about the economy and ICE. And if we could talk about the economy and ICE, we'd be fine."

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner.

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OUR VIEW

GC board:
Let people
speak

There are few rights more precious in a democracy than permitting citizens to address government officials at public meetings.

In Goose Creek CISD, the board typically limits public comments to six speakers at five minutes each.

On Monday night, with listed agenda items “accept resignation of superintendent” and name “interim superintendent,” there will be a large crowd of people who want to address the board over its effort to force out the current superintendent. (Superintendent Randal O’Brien says he will not sign a separation agreement and wants to serve out his contract that expires in June. The Sun supports renewing the contract.)

School board president Pete Pape said Saturday that he is not inclined to extend the comment period. He said if a motion was made and seconded, there could be a vote.

We strongly encourage Mr. Pape and all board members to extend the time and listen.

We understand the desire to get on with district business, but all residents have the right to contribute to the governance of this district, and anyone with a legitimate issue should be given time during a board meeting.

That’s democracy. If it takes an hour, or longer, for all to speak, that’s how long the school board should listen.

Given the challenges the district faces today, school board members should do more to embrace and engage their constituents. Elected officials shouldn’t shy away from citizen criticism at public meetings.

And shutting down criticism only makes the public suspicious and helps breed distrust and distance between public officials and the citizens they were elected to represent.

The Goose Creek board must extend the public comment period Monday, and beyond.

Elected officials who feel they need to be protected from public criticism might want to consider another way to serve.

— David Bloom

A spurious
way to conduct
public business

Elected officials are supposed to be trained in the requirements of the Texas Open Meetings law. In addition to setting forth the guidelines for posting agendas, conducting meetings, properly holding executive sessions, and other requirements, the law prohibits officials from meeting to conduct official business outside of public meetings.

The law also bans members from meeting in numbers of less than a quorum – through successive meetings, phone calls or electronic messages – for the purpose of circumventing the act.

That’s called a “walking quorum.”

From the email on Page 7A, it’s clear the Goose Creek school board president initiated a walking quorum to discuss the superintendent’s contract on July 6.

The purpose of a walking quorum is to keep the public in the dark about the discussions and decisions. A subterfuge that enables public officials to share information without gathering at the same time and place.

A walking quorum usually involves a subject of particular sensitivity locally, and that’s why it’s employed.

Clearly, discussions of the superintendent contract happened outside a public meeting and, therefore, improperly.

The board’s actions subvert the spirit of the Texas open meetings act and it is a spurious way to conduct the public’s business.

— David Bloom

Baytown Sun Survey

Last week, readers were asked, “When do you believe kids should start playing tackle football?”

First steps
10.2%
Pop Warner
16.8%
Jr. High
59.2%
Band man
13.8%

This week’s question: “How do you think the future of GCCISD Superintendent Randal O’Brien should be resolved?”
Respond at www.baytownsun.com.

I’m still here, finally writing again

Hello, again.

After a break from Viewpoints in The Baytown Sun, I’m resuming my column. I was gone longer than expected, but even after I began to feel better, I didn’t rush back to the writing routine. “Writer’s block,” some would say, but the real reason for the delay is simple: I got lazy.

I reached the point where I’d rather watch TV than stare at a computer screen. “Downton Abbey” re-runs and old episodes of “The Office” kept me from what I needed to be doing, and so did “Pioneer Woman” on Food Network. I used to fuss about the speaking voice of Ree Drummond, the star of the show, but I don’t worry about that any more. She has great ideas and terrific recipes. We can forget the way she talks.

Also on Food Network, I enjoyed watching singer Trish Yearwood and actress Valerie Bertinelli stir around in their kitchens. Golleree, I didn’t know celebrities could cook.

In regard to renovating and decorating homes, I dropped “Fixer Upper” in favor of “Love It or List It,” preferring Hilary Farr’s decorating skills to those of Joanna Gaines. It’s just as well. Joanna and husband Chip are leaving “Fixer Upper” any-



WANDA ORTON

Show Heaven this summer. Those movies take me back to the golden era of the Brunson, Bay and Arcadia theaters in old Baytown and the Texan in Goose Creek. My goodness, the first movie ever shown at the Brunson was a musical, and – wouldn’t you know -- I was there, wouldn’t have missed it. (“Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” with Donald O’Connor and Gloria DeHaven.)

By the way, did you know Ruby Keeler, who starred in musicals in the early 1930s, constantly looked at her feet while tap dancing? Just thought I’d mention that.

Feeling lethargic, down in the dumps? I thoroughly recommend “Mame,” a genuine fixer-upper for the doldrums, along with – I might add -- “The Music Man,” “Singin’ in the Rain” and the more recent “La

La Land.”

Lucille Ball starred in “Mame” and while we won’t catch her staring at her steps, she was miscast in the lead role. However, even at her worst, Lucille Ball is better than most performers at their best. How can we not love Lucy.

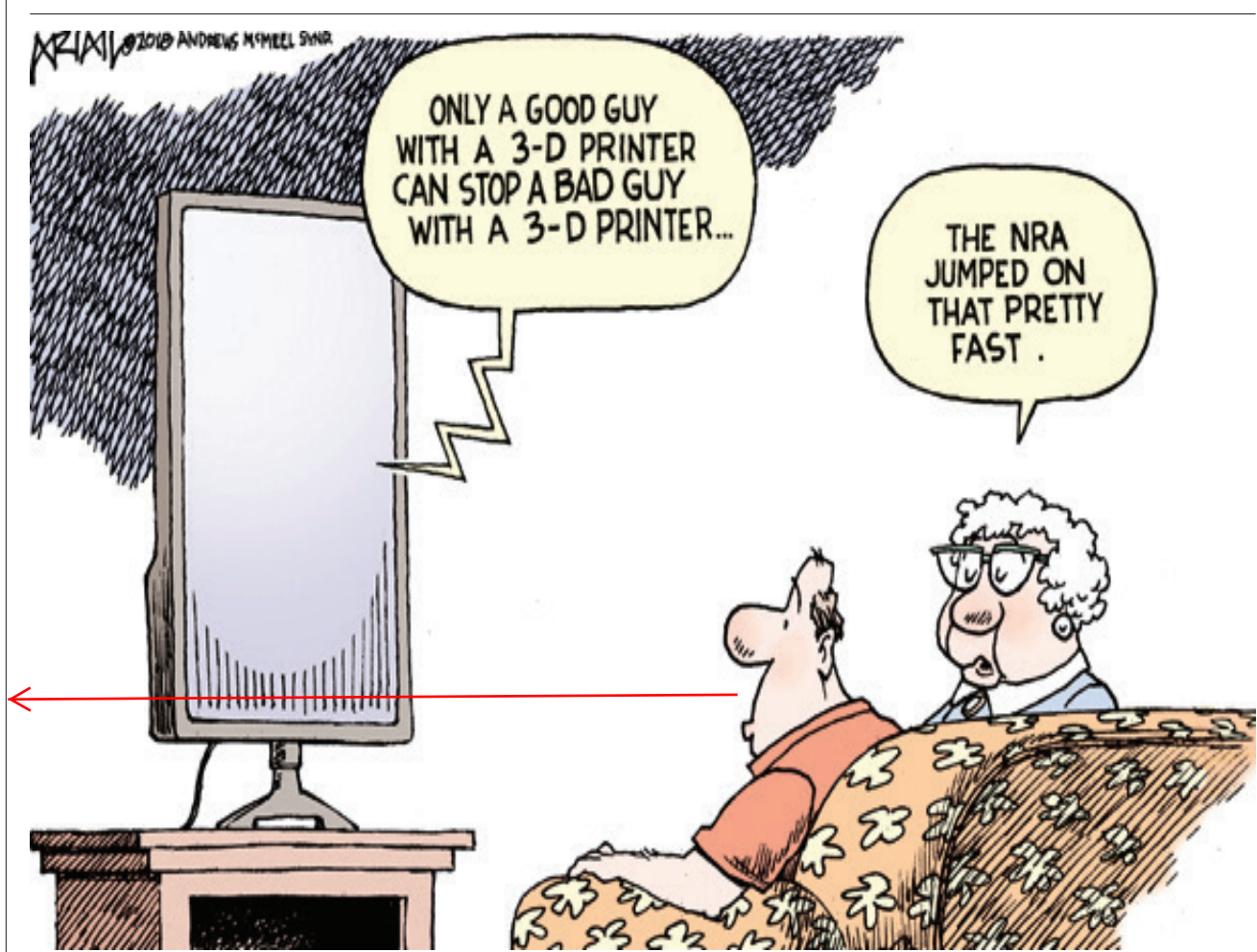
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Seeing red but not the way you think

Trust me, what I’m about to tell you – well, most of it anyway – is the complete truth, so help me Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

I believe FBI Director Jim Comey will verify this for me now that he has ... Wait, Jimbo is no longer with the FBI. I believe he is working security at a 7-11.

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JIM FINLEY

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I felt despondent. I felt scared.

I also wondered, am I losing my mind? (Don’t answer that.)

Were my eyes needing some kind of injection? I hope not. That would hurt.

Was I drinking too much Glaceau Dragonfruit Vitamin Water, which is delicious and has a hint of pinkish-red coloring?

I was puzzled.

Unfortunately, I don’t have another appointment with my Major Eye Guy, Dr. Martin Arisco, for weeks. I’ve been trusting what Martin tells me for 30-plus years.

But would he believe me, anyway?

Fortunately, it hasn’t happened again – seeing red – as this is skillfully written. Hopefully it won’t.

Still, it bugs me.

In the deep of night, as I struggle to slumber, I’ve been thinking about those instantaneous red flashes. How could I not?

Have I been chosen by some extraterrestrial power as the subject of some out-of-world experiment? If so, why me when Joy Behar is available and a more likely candidate?

Over the years, I’ve written some timely and well-done columns on extraterrestrial beings. Maybe they subscribe to The Baytown Sun and this is their revenge.

Hey, maybe it’s time, in the near future, that I do another column on spaceships and the like. That would teach them.

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I’m telling the truth.

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OUR VIEW

GC board:
Let people
speak

There are few rights more precious in a democracy than permitting citizens to address government officials at public meetings.

In Goose Creek CISD, the board typically limits public comments to six speakers at five minutes each.

On Monday night, with listed agenda items “accept resignation of superintendent” and name “interim superintendent,” there will be a large crowd of people who want to address the board over its effort to force out the current superintendent. (Superintendent Randal O’Brien says he will not sign a separation agreement and wants to serve out his contract that expires in June. The Sun supports renewing the contract.)

School board president Pete Pape said Saturday that he is not inclined to extend the comment period. He said if a motion was made and seconded, there could be a vote.

We strongly encourage Mr. Pape and all board members to extend the time and listen.

We understand the desire to get on with district business, but all residents have the right to contribute to the governance of this district, and anyone with a legitimate issue should be given time during a board meeting.

That’s democracy. If it takes an hour, or longer, for all to speak, that’s how long the school board should listen.

Given the challenges the district faces today, school board members should do more to embrace and engage their constituents. Elected officials shouldn’t shy away from citizen criticism at public meetings.

And shutting down criticism only makes the public suspicious and helps breed distrust and distance between public officials and the citizens they were elected to represent.

The Goose Creek board must extend the public comment period Monday, and beyond.

Elected officials who feel they need to be protected from public criticism might want to consider another way to serve.

— David Bloom

A spurious
way to conduct
public business

Elected officials are supposed to be trained in the requirements of the Texas Open Meetings law. In addition to setting forth the guidelines for posting agendas, conducting meetings, properly holding executive sessions, and other requirements, the law prohibits officials from meeting to conduct official business outside of public meetings.

The law also bans members from meeting in numbers of less than a quorum – through successive meetings, phone calls or electronic messages – for the purpose of circumventing the act.

That’s called a “walking quorum.”

From the email on Page 7A, it’s clear the Goose Creek school board president initiated a walking quorum to discuss the superintendent’s contract on July 6.

The purpose of a walking quorum is to keep the public in the dark about the discussions and decisions. A subterfuge that enables public officials to share information without gathering at the same time and place.

A walking quorum usually involves a subject of particular sensitivity locally, and that’s why it’s employed.

Clearly, discussions of the superintendent contract happened outside a public meeting and, therefore, improperly.

The board’s actions subvert the spirit of the Texas open meetings act and it is a spurious way to conduct the public’s business.

— David Bloom

Baytown Sun Survey

Last week, readers were asked, “When do you believe kids should start playing tackle football?”

First steps
10.2%
Pop Warner
16.8%
Jr. High
59.2%
Band man
13.8%

This week’s question: “How do you think the future of GCCISD Superintendent Randal O’Brien should be resolved?”
Respond at www.baytownsun.com.

I’m still here, finally writing again

Hello, again.

After a break from Viewpoints in The Baytown Sun, I’m resuming my column. I was gone longer than expected, but even after I began to feel better, I didn’t rush back to the writing routine. “Writer’s block,” some would say, but the real reason for the delay is simple: I got lazy.

I reached the point where I’d rather watch TV than stare at a computer screen. “Downton Abbey” re-runs and old episodes of “The Office” kept me from what I needed to be doing, and so did “Pioneer Woman” on Food Network. I used to fuss about the speaking voice of Ree Drummond, the star of the show, but I don’t worry about that any more. She has great ideas and terrific recipes. We can forget the way she talks.

Also on Food Network, I enjoyed watching singer Trish Yearwood and actress Valerie Bertinelli stir around in their kitchens. Golleree, I didn’t know celebrities could cook.

In regard to renovating and decorating homes, I dropped “Fixer Upper” in favor of “Love It or List It,” preferring Hilary Farr’s decorating skills to those of Joanna Gaines. It’s just as well. Joanna and husband Chip are leaving “Fixer Upper” any-



WANDA ORTON

Show Heaven this summer. Those movies take me back to the golden era of the Brunson, Bay and Arcadia theaters in old Baytown and the Texan in Goose Creek. My goodness, the first movie ever shown at the Brunson was a musical, and – wouldn’t you know -- I was there, wouldn’t have missed it. (“Yes Sir, That’s My Baby” with Donald O’Connor and Gloria DeHaven.)

By the way, did you know Ruby Keeler, who starred in musicals in the early 1930s, constantly looked at her feet while tap dancing? Just thought I’d mention that.

Feeling lethargic, down in the dumps? I thoroughly recommend “Mame,” a genuine fixer-upper for the doldrums, along with – I might add -- “The Music Man,” “Singin’ in the Rain” and the more recent “La

La Land.”

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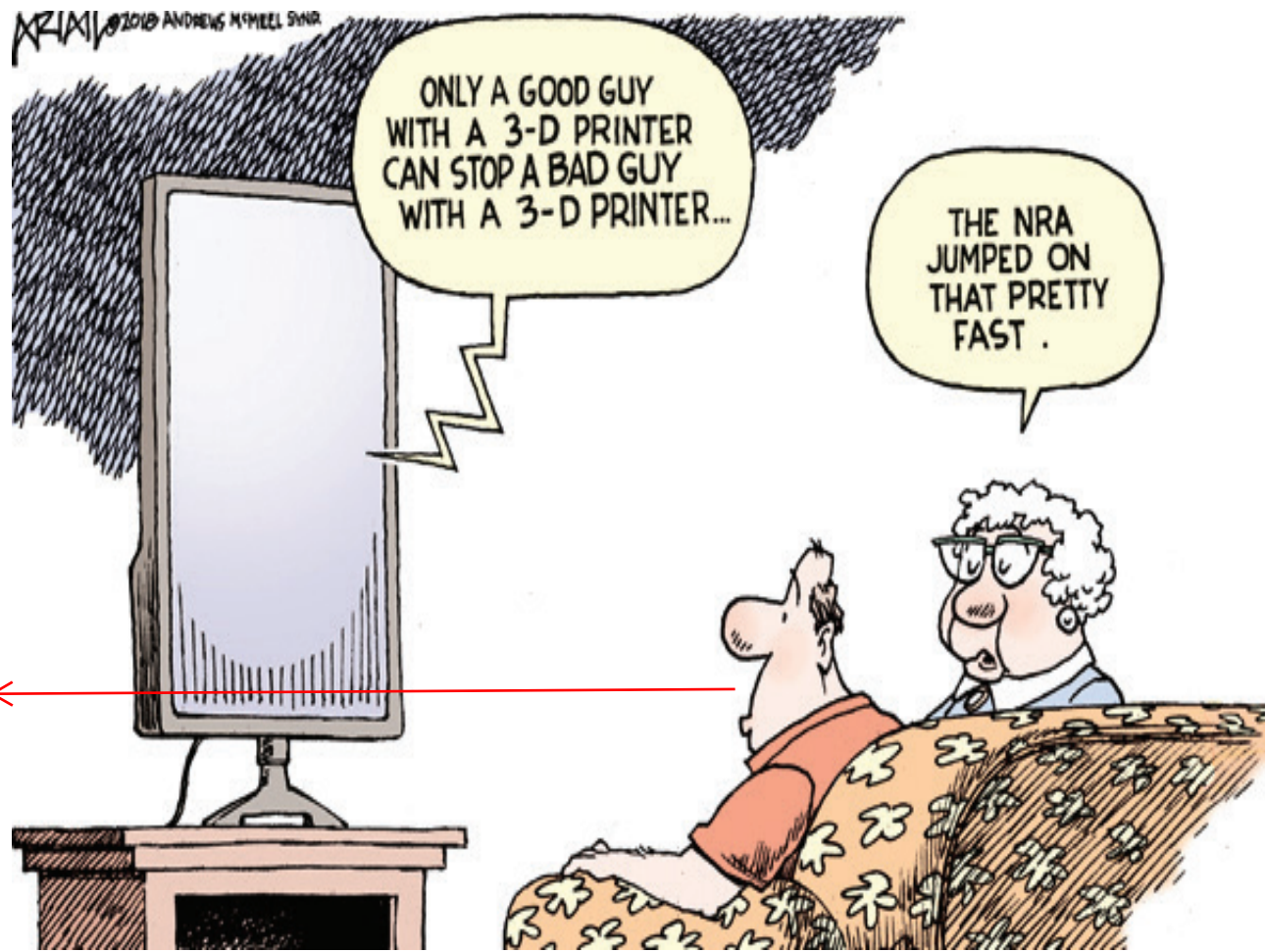
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OUR VIEW

Get to work
Goose Creek

The fight over the future of the Goose Creek superintendent certainly raised red flags about leadership in the district.

Clearly there has been an undercurrent of negativity between the superintendent and the school board for some time. The Aug. 6 agenda would not have included votes on the superintendent’s resignation and naming of an interim superintendent if the board had not already decided.

Goose Creek has had four superintendents in 10 years and we were well on our way to a fifth before an outpouring of community support for the superintendent and anger toward the board put a halt to that.

Public distrust of the school board is running high. There is no other way to read the events of the past two weeks.

Board members would be wise to heed this message: Voters will not reward questionable actions, secrecy and dysfunction with money and trust.

And even though the superintendent’s contract has been extended, the situation remains messy and could get even messier unless school board members and administrators finally put aside their differences.

School board members must recognize the upsetting impact a revolving door of leadership can have on student achievement and employee morale.

Board members are elected officials. They must focus on the job they were elected to do: Set policy for the district.

The superintendent is responsible for making sure that vision is implemented without interference.

Unrest at the top filters down. The board and administration need to work together as a team and do what’s best for the kids.

The sooner, the better; the sooner, the faster the district can focus on improving test scores and graduation rates.

Otherwise, the district could remain consumed by turmoil. And that would be a shame for more than 24,000 school children. Their educational futures are infinitely more important than anything else.

— David Bloom

NATION VIEW

Trump vs. Omarosa

President Trump’s spat with Omarosa Manigault Newman, the White House adviser who was fired in December for “serious integrity issues,” is another of those particularly Trumpian innovations in public life — the raging dumpster fire that continues to yield new trash.

In her new tell-all, aptly titled “Unhinged,” Manigault Newman paints an unflattering portrait of the president, whom she has known since appearing as a contestant on his reality TV show “The Apprentice” in 2004. She characterizes Trump as a racist, misogynistic narcissist with poor impulse control, severe attention-deficit issues and signs of creeping mental decline, who “loves the hate,” “thrives on criticism and insults” and “delights in chaos and confusion.” Her anecdotes range from the prosaically awful (she claims he has used the N-word) to the freakish (she says she once walked into the Oval Office and found him eating paper). The Trump campaign offered her a \$15,000-a-month sinecure to keep quiet about her on-the-job experiences.

And, oh yes, she has secret audio recordings to corroborate some of her claims, including a recording of her firing by the chief of staff, John Kelly, in the Situation Room.

Trump has responded with characteristic restraint. He has dismissed Manigault Newman as “wacky”; called her a “lowlife”; mocked her for her having, he claims, weepily begged him for a job in the White House; and said she was “hated” by her colleagues for being “nasty,” “vicious, but not smart” and “nothing but problems.” Despite all this, insists Trump, he had tried his best to make things work because Manigault Newman always said “GREAT things” about him. For this president, there remains no higher job qualification than constantly telling him and others what a super guy he is.

On both sides, the spat is vintage Trump: tawdry, cruel, vindictive and highly personal. That said, this is about more than a petty feud with a former aide who famously shares Trump’s love of chaos, confusion and high drama. It is also a glaring reminder of one of this president’s central failings as a leader: his disastrous judgment when choosing people with whom to surround himself.

— The New York Times

Baytown Sun Survey

Last week, readers were asked, “Since Trump’s election as president, how have US race relations changed?”

Worse

No difference

Better

43.3%

29.8%

26.9%

This week’s question: “Should the U.S. have had a military parade?” Respond at www.baytownsun.com.

Scruffy’s come long way from puppy mill

OK. Which side are you on? Dogs of full or mixed breeds?

Three dogs reside at our house, including a chihuahua and a min-pin (miniature pinscher), both of whom came with papers to prove their direct ancestry. Our youngest dog is the mixed breed with a mysterious past, the one I call “Scruffy.”

Love all three (even the chihuahua) but have to admit to having a soft spot in my heart for this darling dog with an uncertain family history.

Scruffy was rescued from a puppy mill, poor baby, in New Mexico. Animal activists from Colorado raided the puppy mill and transported the innocent victims to Colorado, to sell them at a Puppy Fair only to people who would love them and provide proper care. Heaven knows, they didn’t enjoy such amenities at the puppy mill.

If you have a strong stomach, Google puppy mills. I won’t go into details but suffice to say, most of the mills across the nation are horrible, unbelievably filthy and cruel.

Apparently, that’s the kind of place from whence our adorable, affectionate Scruffy came.

Granddaughter Olivia, then a college student in Colorado, went



WANDA ORTON

to the Puppy Fair where she discovered Scruffy. It was meant to be. She returned to her apartment with a precious puppy mill puppy.

However, it proved difficult to keep him cooped up in an apartment for many hours while Olivia was in class or play rehearsals. After a few months of trying to get him to adapt to apartment life, Olivia asked Jan -- her mother, my daughter -- to keep the dog temporarily until she graduated from college. At the time we had two cats in addition to the dogs. Welcome to Animal House!

I agreed to keeping this refugee from a puppy mill. After all, it was only temporary.

Olivia has graduated from college by now, and there’s no way we are giving up Scruffy.

Personally, I didn’t like that name for a boy dog, and Jan doesn’t either. She has compromised, though, and registered him at the veterinarian’s office under the name June Bug.

Every year the veterinarians in Fredericksburg conduct a rabies

vaccination clinic, and that’s when we get shots for our pets. When signing up Scruffy, a worker asked Jan for information for their files. Apparently she had never seen him before -- or any dog quite like him. “What kind of dog is he?” she asked.

Jan didn’t know. He seems to have a lot of different breeds. Schnauzer maybe. Could have some Jack Russell Terrier in him, boxer, bull dog, cocker spaniel ... wolf?

Pause.

Another question. “What color is he, exactly?”

Jan figured she was in a better position to answer that one. She could see a little bit of gray, shades of tan, brown, black, little bit of white ... “Finally, how old is he?”

Jan said she didn’t know for sure.

Interview over, on with the vaccination.

Fact is, we don’t care about Scruffy’s mixed lineage, where he came from, what he looks like, etc. We just care about Scruffy.

Wanda Orton is a retired managing editor of The Sun. She can be reached at viewpoints@baytownsun.com, Attention: Wanda Orton.



Remembering Jimbo’s, uh, favorite teacher

Today The Baytown Sun is saluting “Favorite Teachers,” and I want to throw in my 2½ cents’ worth.

Sadly, I must begin by admitting that probably 99 percent (or more) of my former teachers are now teaching in that Big Classroom In The Sky, where erasers and paddles are no longer necessary and school supplies are stockpiled way high.

I approach this subject from a little different perspective. I say that because, as much as it pains me to type, I was NEVER, you know, chosen as a “Favorite Student” by any of my teachers. None.

I was so misunderstood.

Nonetheless, I’m highly qualified in the field of education and want to share my thoughts on this important topic.

School is now in session.

To begin with, I finished a rock-solid 56th in my class. If finishing No. 56 doesn’t qualify me to speak up, nothing does.

Also, daughter Robin Richards, now retired, taught at both Robert E. Lee and Ross S. Sterling, and in School Year 2009-2010, while at Ross S., was selected Goose Creek CISD’s Secondary Teacher of the Year. My bloodline, see.

Grandson Reid followed in his mama Robin’s footsteps. He now teaches at Houston Northside High, formerly Jefferson Davis (go figure). My bloodline, see.

And sister-in-law Judy Finley is retired from the classroom, but her daughter, Ashley Whitaker, still teaches in the Barbers Hill system.

Not only that, Wife Margie was a teacher’s aide/secretary at Horace Mann for more than a quarter-century. She often turned to me in



JIM FINLEY

times of crisis, or would have had there been a crisis.

Finally, a number of my friends were teachers (I have at least 10 total friends, at last count). They, too, sought my advice and counsel if they had a problem. I was always there for them.

So don’t tell me I don’t know about education.

My first grade teacher was a really sweet woman named Gladys Avera. That was back in, like, 1889.

Unfortunately, it went pretty much downhill after that.

It wasn’t my fault.

But I want to focus on one teacher I had who made a difference in my life ... or something.

His name was Perry Barkley. He taught algebra, which I haven’t used, EVER, since I left Sweeny High.

I had the dishonor of being Sweeney’s first and only four-year algebra letterman since I flunked the course twice -- Algebra I and Algebra 2. At least I was consistent.

Mr. Barkley was a tough, no-nonsense guy. If you did anything even semi-stupid, you might well be pranced down the hall to Principal O.D. Miser’s office, where a board would be applied to your hindquarters.

I thought Mr. Barkley was mean. He hurt my feelings often.

If he were teaching today, many parents would be trying to hire Special Counsel Robert Mueller to investigate him.

Most of our teachers back then believed in strict discipline, or as it would be called today, “cruel and unusual punishment.” Funny thing, those teachers had our parents’ solid support.

I never really saw Mr. Barkley smile much, but there was that one time, and it’s an image still embedded in my brain a hundred years later.

He had this non-negotiable rule that you had to be SEATED at your desk when the class bell rang. No exceptions. Or else.

Get the picture?

One day I walked into class and noticed Mr. Barkley sitting not in front but in a student desk in the back.

Soon the bell rang, and a boy named Bobby Ramin walked in late. He spotted Mr. Barkley’s empty desk up front.

“Wow!” Bobby said, nervously. “Glad PERRY isn’t here.”

PERRY?

We laughed aloud as we dove under our desks awaiting the Barkley Explosion. Didn’t happen.

“BOBBY,” he roared, “SIT DOWN. NOW!”

Caught off guard, even Mr. Barkley had a slight smile on his face. Geez, who’d think it.

So maybe Mr. Barkley was my favorite teacher, not because I liked him all that much, but because I was in his class for four long years.

Class dismissed.

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The Baytown Sun

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