

We will reveal those who conceal

*By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist
Monday January 12, 2004, 12:00 AM*

See what happens when you tell a guy he can hide a gun under his sport coat?

Right away, he starts strutting as if he were Matt Dillon kicking up dirt after a little coo-chy-coo with Miss Kitty. Threatening this, threatening that - it's embarrassing, really, especially when the fellow playing shoot'em-up is a state official.

State Rep. Jim Aslanides is just full of spit and swagger now that his concealed-weapon bill has passed. Thanks to Cowboy Jim and his posse, your average citizen - not to mention your not-so-average raging ex-spouse and disgruntled employee - can carry a hidden weapon around any street in the state.

Cowboy Jim was one of the first to take aim, firing away at any journalist armed with the silly notion that each and every resident in this fine state of Texas, I mean Ohio, has a right to know who's carrying a loaded weapon in their neighborhood.

This little showdown came about because one of the new law's provisions prohibits the general public - that would be you - from finding out who is purchasing a permit to carry a concealed weapon.

Only journalists are allowed that information. So, that is exactly what we intend to do. We will find out who bought the permits to carry concealed weapons and then let you know, too.

That gets Cowboy Jim's spurs to spinnin': "I want the journalists in the room to know that if they abuse this access, they can lose the privilege."

I'm sure he meant right: we'll lose the right, as provided by law. Some folks get a little jittery when their finger's on the trigger.

His sidekick from the state Senate, Tag-along Steve Austria, fired the second shot. He said publishing the names of permit holders would be the exact kind of abuse they're talkin' about.

Why, he said, the whole idea behind concealed carry is that the rest of us aren't supposed to know who's carrying 'em. Publishing their names would threaten the safety of the very men and women who don't want you to know they're packin' in the first place.

Hmm.

It seems to me the ones who need protecting aren't the folks who tuck a Glock under their armpit every time they step out to walk the dog or buy a quart of milk. I hate to make assumptions here, but I can't help thinking that folks who carry concealed weapons aren't the ones quoting Gandhi. And if I'm in a store that's about to be robbed, the last place I want to be is between a robber and the Dirty Harry wannabe who's decided to take the perp down.

As a parent, I want to know who's armed in my neighborhood. This is entirely consistent with my family policy of long standing. Whenever my kids were invited to a new family's house, I asked the parent whether they had firearms in the house and, if so, how and where they stored them. Did they have a child safety lock, which is not required in Ohio? Was the gun loaded?

If that sounds excessive, keep in mind that, according to the most recent stats, in 2001 alone, 87 children and teenagers in Ohio died from gunfire.

That's 87 children too many. And, so far, children can't buy guns. Money buys guns.

Money drove this legislation, too. And only money can stop it, says Lori O'Neill, president of the Million Mom March, Cleveland chapter.

"This was special-interest legislation passed solely for a handful of people incredibly well-funded. Poll after poll shows that 70 percent of Ohioans oppose the concealed-weapon law.

But our legislature passed it anyway."

The only way to fight it, she says, is to collect the 193,000 signatures needed in 90 days to put a referendum on the ballot. "We'd need at least a half-million dollars to do that, and we don't have it."

So, what can you do to keep your family out of firing range?

Not much, if you're the average Ohio citizen. You can't even find out who in your neighborhood, your office or your school district has bought a permit to carry a hidden weapon.

So, we journalists will find out for you.

That's not a threat.

That's the law.

Start right here to register to vote

By: Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Monday January 19, 2004, 12:00 AM

To understand how important Ohio is in this year's presidential race, consider the following two facts: No Republican has won the presidency without winning Ohio since the 1800s. The last Democrat to win the presidency without Ohio was John F. Kennedy in 1960. In other words, as Ohio goes, so goes the country.

We've got a job to do.

Today is the first time The Plain Dealer is running the Ohio voter registration form. It won't be the last time. We're going to devote a lot of time and ink to get out the vote this year.

That's the voter registration form, right next to me. It's valid in every county in Ohio. You can mail it or deliver it in person to your county board of elections. That contact list is in this section on page D4.

Before we published it, we wanted to be sure you could fill it out and return it as a valid registration form. Finding that out sure was harder than it should have been.

We started by calling Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell's office. Had we stopped with that call, thousands of eligible voters would not be able to register using our newspaper's form.

I didn't actually speak to Blackwell, who did not return my call. Instead, his press secretary, Carlo LoParo, said voters could not use our form because of paper weight restrictions. When I pointed out that the Ohio license bureaus use voter registration forms that violate the weight restriction, he said he'd have to call me back.

Instead, his deputy, James Lee, called to say the problem is that election board officials would have to transfer the information off the Plain Dealer forms onto official forms, send them back to the voters for their signature again, and "that could delay the process."

On that we agreed: It would definitely delay the process. In fact, it could stop a lot of voters from ever setting foot in a polling booth.

Not to worry, though. The response was quite different from the seven county election boards in our circulation area: Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage and Summit. Every last one of them said they would accept The Plain Dealer form.

Connie Schultz

Some boards will transfer the information, then cut out registrant signatures and affix them in the appropriate spot. Others will staple the newspaper form to the official one. Still others will simply file this form as their official record.

We just want to make it as easy as possible for Ohioans to vote, they all said.

So do we.

Keep in mind the following rules:

You must be a U.S. citizen, an Ohio resident for at least 30 days before the election, and registered to vote at least 30 days before Election Day. Register by Monday, Feb. 2, to vote in the primary; by Monday, Oct. 4, to vote in the general election.

You must also be at least 18 years old by Tuesday, Nov. 2, to vote in the primary. A special heads-up to 17-year-olds: If you will be 18 by Nov. 2, you may vote for candidates, but not issues, in the Tuesday, March 2 primary.

Board officials asked me to include a few other reminders: Fill out your form in black ink, not pencil, and don't forget to sign it.

If you are already registered to vote, don't fill out another form unless you have moved or changed your name.

If you're mailing the form, remember to affix a postage stamp on the envelope.

We're going to have a lot of conversations about voting in the months ahead. I'd like to hear what you have to say.

If you're heading up a voter registration drive, tell me about it.


If you're a high school teacher or college professor registering student voters, let me know.

If you're a student registering other students, I'd really like to hear from you. I have a real soft spot for young activists, especially this year, when so much is at stake.

A lot of you wonder if your vote matters. I intend to show you it does, but in the meantime I can tell you this for sure:

If you don't vote, you don't count. That means you won't matter at all.

Please read instructions on reverse side Please type or print clearly with black pen

1. Are you a U.S. citizen? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			
2. Will you be 18 years of age on or before the next general election? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No			
If you answered NO to either of the questions, do not complete this form.			
3. Last Name	First Name	Middle Name or Initial	Jr., II, etc.
4. Home Number and Street (Please omit address if overseas)	* Apt. or Box #	5. City or Post Office	6. ZIP Code
7. Additional Mailing Address (if necessary)		8. County where you live	FOR BOARD USE ONLY SECTION (Rev. 2/90)
9. Birthdate (MO DAY YR)	10. Ohio Driver's License No. OR State of Social Security No. (required)	11. Mailing No. (voluntary)	
12. ADDRESS CHANGE ONLY - PREVIOUS ADDRESS Previous Home Number and Street			
Previous City or Post Office			
Country			
State			
13. CHANGE OF NAME ONLY	Former Legal Name	Former Signature	City, Village, Twp.
14. Signature of Applicant 			Ward
Date signed ____/____/____			Precinct
MO DAY YR			School Dist.
WHOEVER COMMITTS ELECTION FALSIFICATION IS GUILTY OF A FELONY OF THE FIFTH DEGREE.			Cons. Dist.
Cuyahoga County Board of Elections			Sen. Dist.
			House Dist.

BOARD OF ELECTIONS

Cuyahoga County Board of Elections
2925 Euclid Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115
216-443-3200

Geauga County Board of Elections
215 Main St.
Chardon, OH 44024 440-285-2222
Lake County Board of Elections
105 Main St., Box 490
Painesville, OH 44077-0490
440-350-2700, 440-918-2700, or 440-298-3744

Lorain County Board of Elections
Elyria Office
115 Cedar St.
Elyria, OH 44035
440-326-5900

Lorain Office
2158 Broadway
Lorain, OH 44052
440-244-3186

Medina County Board of Elections
4210 North
Jefferson St.
Medina, OH 44256
Medina: 330-722-9278
Brunswick/Hinckley: 330-225-7100, Ext. 9278
Wadsworth: 330-336-6657, Ext. 9278

Portage County Board of Elections
449 S. Meridian St.
Ravenna, OH 44266
330-297-3511

Summit County Board of Elections
470 Grant St.
Akron, OH 44311-1157
330-643-5200

Here's a little tip about gratuities

*By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist
Thursday April 01, 2004, 12:00 AM*

If you've ever used a coat check, you probably noticed a tip jar on the counter at evening's end.

You might stick a bill or two into that jar without even thinking about who is getting the tip. You probably assume the person behind the counter, usually a woman, is getting the money.

That's certainly what I always assumed. From now on, I'm going to ask.

In the last year, I have attended three charity events at Windows on the River, a banquet hall at the Powerhouse in the Flats. At the end of each dinner, I picked up my wrap at the coat-check counter.

One of those times, I pointed to the large tip jar bulging with bills and said to the weary clerk, "Well, at least you get a decent amount of tips for standing here."

She shook her head and said, "Oh, we don't get to keep those."

I thought I misheard her. "What?"

"We don't keep the tips."

"Who does?" I asked.

"Management."

When I asked her how that made her feel, she sighed. "They say they use it to give us a Christmas party."

Nowhere was there a sign indicating that the pile of bills in the tip jar was going, not to the clerk, but to management.

Recently, I attended another dinner at Windows on the River. This time, the tips were stuffed into a large, opaque box. I watched as one person after another shoved bills into the slot on the top.

"Who gets these tips?" I asked the coat-check clerk.

She resisted telling me, but I pressed. "Management," she said softly.

"How does that make you feel?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Life isn't fair, right?"

This week, I called Kristine Jones, the general manager for Windows.

"Why are you asking about this?" she said. "Why do you care?"

The "girls," she insisted, are happy with the current arrangement. "It's not like they're standing there all night. The girls check the coats and then wait on tables until the last hour. And they're already paid an hourly wage."

Later that same day, two vice presidents -- Dave Grunenwald and Pat McKinley -- called on speakerphone from Jacobs International Management Co., which owns Windows.

"We're confused," Grunenwald said. "This is newsworthy?"

They were brimming with assurances. Their 30 or so employees -- some of the kindest, most professional servers I've ever encountered -- are paid more than the minimum wage. How much more, they wouldn't say. The company matches any 401(k) contribution they can make but offers no health insurance because they're all part time.

And they get a free meal. "Some places charge their employees for food," McKinley said.

Grunenwald and McKinley say they collect only \$800 a year in that tip jar. Hard to believe, judging from the amount stuffed into the box last Friday night. "We match it for their Christmas party," Grunenwald said.

When I asked if they'd ever let the employees decide between keeping the tips and having a party, they fell silent.

That would be a "no."

"Why does this matter?" they asked.

Dignity is non-negotiable, writes scholar Vartan Gregorian. It is also every human's birthright, and management's blatant rankism at Windows is an assault on the dignity of all involved.

Generous patrons are misled. Hard-working employees must stand silently by as they watch management walk off with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dollars intended for them.

"Maybe we need to rethink this," Grunenwald said. "Maybe we do," echoed McKinley.

There's no maybe about it. Both union and industry officials say keeping the coat-check tips is unacceptable.

General manager Jones was unrepentant. "I don't ever think about who's getting the tip when I use a coat check," she said. "I don't care."

Then she added, "I don't think anyone else cares who gets the tip, either."

I think she's wrong.

What do you think?

Justice faltered; don't let your voices

By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Monday June 07, 2004, 12:00 AM

It has to be said: Bob Kreischer could have walked away.

No matter how much he thought Terry Wooten was goading him to fight in May 2000, Kreischer could have refused to take that swing.

They were hostile neighbors in rural Perry County, where both men had property. On that evening, witnesses said Wooten was yelling at Kreischer's 14-year-old son and then he started pushing and taunting Kreischer.

So Kreischer's anger got the best of him. He took on Wooten, man-to-man.

In her gripping, two-part Sunday Magazine story, "Road to Ruin," Plain Dealer reporter Andrea Simakis described what witnesses said they saw: Wooten shoved Kreischer.

"That's all you got?" Kreischer said.

Wooten moved to push him again. Kreischer drew back his right arm and let his fist fly. And that was that, insists Kreischer. One punch broke a paper-thin bone in Wooten's face, and the fight was over.

Only it wasn't.

It's not unusual for two parties to disagree. Kreischer said he hit Wooten once. Wooten told police Kreischer kicked him several times in the ribs.

By the time they went to trial, however, Wooten had changed his story. He claimed Kreischer repeatedly kicked him in the head with steel-toed boots, causing hearing loss, a fractured face and a torn retina.

Crucial evidence never made it to trial: Wooten's statement to police that he was kicked only in the ribs, and his hospital emergency room report, which indicated only a single blow to the face.

Kreischer is now in prison, serving a two-year sentence for felonious assault. His wife and three children barely are scraping by, and he faces a lifetime of debt when he is released.

One of the jurors who convicted Kreischer told Simakis that had he known Wooten never told police he was

kicked in the head, he would have changed his vote. That alone should require a new trial.

But Perry County Common Pleas Judge Linton Lewis doesn't see it that way. Neither does Prosecutor Joseph Flautt.

If Ohio required every prosecutor to share all evidence prior to trial, Kreischer might not be sitting in prison right now. At the very least, the jury would have had all the facts.

In Ohio, though, prosecutors have a lot of discretion. Some prosecutors have enough faith in this country's judicial system to allow open discovery. But too many prosecutors measure justice by their own won-loss records. Justice becomes a contest, rather than a search for the truth.

Even before part two of Simakis' story ran Sunday, readers weighed in. How could this happen in our country, they asked. And how do we fix it?

Ohio Public Defender David Bodiker said our state's Supreme Court almost adopted an open-discovery rule in the mid-1990s, only to be thwarted by the state legislature that was heavily lobbied by - surprise - prosecutors.

We can't change the law in a day. But maybe we can change a few minds. The minds of two people, to be precise: Judge Lewis, who could grant Kreischer early release but has refused to do so. And Gov. Bob Taft, who could pardon Kreischer.

For years, Kreischer carried around a copy of the U.S. Constitution. That's how much he believed in this country.

Before he went to prison, he had no criminal record. He has already served more than nine months.

You can read his story online at www.cleveland.com/sundaymag/.

If you believe Kreischer should be freed, write or call:

Judge Linton Lewis

Perry County Court of Common Pleas

P.O. Box 7

New Lexington, OH 43764

Phone: 740-342-1204

E-mail: cpcourt@netpluscom.com

Ohio Gov. Bob Taft

77 South High St., 30th Floor

Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614-466-3555

E-mail at this Web site: governor.ohio.gov/contactinfopage.asp.

A soldier salutes her fallen friends

By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Thursday July 01, 2004, 12:00 AM

Sgt. Cheri L. Brown was sitting in her living room on Cleveland's near West Side last Thursday when an ad for the war exhibit popped up on her television screen.

The traveling exhibit, "Eyes Wide Open: Beyond Fear -- Towards Hope," was headed to the Coventry Village Library in Cleveland Heights. For four short hours, more than 800 pairs of military boots would stand in silent tribute to the American soldiers who have died in Iraq.

Two of those soldiers she knew by name. They served alongside her in Iraq, fellow soldiers in the Ohio National Guard's 135th Military Police Company.

Spc. Todd Bates died trying to save Staff Sgt. Aaron Reese from drowning in the Tigris River.

They were her comrades, and her friends.

She knew what she had to do.

The 44-year-old single mother of two sons grabbed her tan desert boots by the door and threw them into her 1981 Suburban Scottsdale. She drove to the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Main Library on Lee Road, where she found the informational part of the exhibit, which is sponsored by the Quaker-affiliated American Friends Service Committee.

"I'm looking for the boots," she told a volunteer, who gave her directions for the short drive to Coventry.

When she pulled up around 2:30 p.m., volunteers had just begun to set up the boots exhibit, which included walls representing the 11,000 Iraqi civilians who've been killed.

She grabbed her own boots and headed for the small patch of grass at the corner of Coventry Road and Euclid Heights Boulevard, only a hundred feet or so from a school playground built in the name of peace.

Sgt. Brown introduced herself and told AFSC local director Greg Coleridge that she wanted to donate her boots to the exhibit. When he explained that the black boots there represented soldiers who had died, she nodded her head.

"I understand that," she said. "But I served alongside a couple of the men whose names are on those boots. I'd like to leave mine in tribute."

Coleridge immediately agreed.

She looked at the tubs of boots. "Do you need any help setting up?" she asked.

The volunteers eagerly welcomed her. She reached into the nearest tub of boots and read the name tag on the first pair she pulled out: Staff Sgt. Aaron Reese.

Sgt. Brown sucked in a breath and started to cry.

She still remembers the first time she ever saw Aaron. She had arrived for deployment to Iraq in February 2003, and as she walked toward the armory, she noticed a soldier standing with his wife. His toddler son was playing in the snow. Aaron wept as he cradled his baby and tried to say a few last words to his wife.

"He didn't even know then that was the last time he'd ever hold his baby," Sgt. Brown said, her voice breaking.

Last Thursday, she thought about that moment again as she held "his" boots in her hands, then wrapped them around her neck. She wore them for the entire time she helped set up the other boots.

She watched the volunteers randomly place the boots in the grass. She sucked in her breath again and asked a favor.

"Could we please line them up in formation?" she asked. "Could you straighten them out, make sure they're placed together right?"

Whenever we stand together, that's how we do it, in formation."

When the exhibit opened at 4 p.m., the empty soldiers' boots were neatly lined up like headstones, row after row. A single pair of tan desert boots rested near a tree in stark contrast to the hundreds of black boots from Army-Navy stores.

They were Sgt. Brown's tribute to the fallen, and a prayer of gratitude that she came home alive.

"I wish everybody could come home now," she said. "I hope no one else has to die. When you see all those boots . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Sgt. Brown pulled away from the exhibit around 4:30.

Less than an hour later, the local public radio station announced that three more American soldiers had died.

Another slap in face of justice

*By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist
Thursday September 02, 2004, 12:00 AM*

The latest chapter in the story of wrongly incarcerated Michael Green might well be titled "Let's Make a Deal."

Michael spent 13 years in prison for a rape he did not commit. His release, in October 2001, turned out to be only the beginning of his fight for justice from the state of Ohio. He was forced to sue the state for the money owed him by law. Ohio then made him wait almost two years before he saw one cent, demanding that Michael prove he was entitled to compensation from the state that had already declared him innocent.

By Ohio Attorney General Jim Petro's own admission, it took the wrath of hundreds of Plain Dealer readers to kick the state into doing the right thing. Almost two full years after Michael's release on DNA evidence, he received some, but not all, of the money that was rightfully his.

That's one form of Ohio justice.

Recently, we saw another.

Joseph Serowik was the Cleveland Police Department scientist who worked on Michael's case. Subsequent analysis showed that his testimony against Green was, at best, seriously flawed, prompting an ongoing review of about 50 of Serowik's other cases in which a defendant was convicted.

The city of Cleveland suspended Serowik in June, and then fired him.

Two months later, the state of Ohio, via Youngstown State University, gave Serowik a new job. Serowik is now an assistant professor in the forensic science program. It is a full-time job, with benefits and possibly tenure down the road. What a deal.

Serowik had two job references: his supervisor, Victor Kovacic, who has been suspended pending completion of an audit of criminal cases during his tenure; and Timothy McGinty, the prosecutor in Michael's case who is now a Cuyahoga County Common Pleas judge.

McGinty was recently quoted in The Plain Dealer as suggesting that Michael shared the blame for his conviction, claiming Michael had bragged on the street about his prison past and his conquest of women. Michael had no prison record at the time of trial, and he always denied bragging about women.

McGinty now says he regrets maligning Michael. Again. "As soon as it came out of my mouth I wished I hadn't said it . . . I would never, ever suggest Michael Green deserved to go to prison, and I take full responsibility for my role in his conviction. I made a mistake prosecuting him, and I am ashamed of that mistake."

McGinty will probably hear from prosecutors in the next few days, just as he did after he apologized to Green after his release. Prosecutors berated McGinty for that. "You should never apologize," they told him. "You should never admit you were wrong."

McGinty also said he regrets recommending Serowik. "I don't know if he did anything wrong, but it was a stupid thing for me to do. I was just trying to help out someone who needed a job."

That excuse rings hollow for Michael. He wanted to help troubled youths after his release, but for months the only job he could get was at a McDonald's known for hiring ex-felons. In the three years that I have known Michael Green, this was the first time I've heard him angry.

"How can this man [Serowik] teach anything? He can't be trusted. He lied about me, and his lies sent me to prison for 13 years. Is that the criminal justice he's going to teach?"

Michael said he considered visiting McGinty. "I've thought about going down to the courthouse and asking him, 'A reference? You gave that man a reference? You told me you were sorry, that you would remember what happened to me every time you sit in that courtroom.' I don't believe his apology. I don't believe he cares at all."

Youngstown State had the right idea in hiring someone involved in Michael's case. They just picked the wrong guy. The person those students need to hear from is Michael.

Unfortunately, he's not for hire. Lately, he can't even talk about those years in prison.

"It's too hard," he said. "It's just too hard. I've tried to block out as much as I can. You have to give up so much of yourself to survive there, and I'm still trying to get the rest of me back."

Ohio pulls away the welcome mat

*By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist
Monday November 15, 2004, 12:00 AM*

The Sunday after the election was like any other morning at Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ in Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood.

The choir director cheerfully led us in a Latin chant. Another member urged us to dig deep so that poor children in the neighborhood will have a Christmas. Pastor Kate Huey preached about stewardship as a way to let our light shine.

The mood turned, though, when head pastor Laurie Hafner talked about the passage of Ohio's Issue 1.

This amendment, which had the support of many priests and pastors, is the harshest such legislation of its kind in the country. It bans gay marriages and all civil unions and strips health benefits to unmarried couples - gay or straight - at public colleges, including Cleveland State and Ohio State.

In word and deed, Ohio told thousands of gay and lesbian couples that they, and their kind of love, aren't welcome here.

Pastor Laurie asked everyone in the congregation who was affected by Issue 1 to stand.

Silently, more than 50 rose to their feet.

Pastor Kate stood. So did the choir director, and the man leading the children's Christmas drive. The doctor who has dedicated his life to caring for the poor stood, too, as did many church volunteers who always greet me by name.

And there was Jackie, dear Jackie, one of my oldest friends, who called me the day after the election, unable to summon one ounce of her usual fire.

"I'm scared, Con," she told me. "I'm honestly scared."

One after another, the gay members of our congregation stood. They didn't look angry or defiant. They looked abandoned.

Many of us still sitting in the pews began to weep.

Pastor Laurie, her own voice breaking, rattled off the many ways our gay members enrich our lives. Then she made a promise that brought the entire congregation to its feet.

"We promise again, this day, to each and every member of this community of faith: You have our love and support," she said. "We promise never to take it back."

William Sloane Coffin wrote, "God dwells with those in America who feel geographically at home and spiritually in exile." That is my prayer.

We keep hearing that Issue 1 supporters voted on "moral values." Well, I took my values to the polls, too, and they are grounded in my own Christian upbringing. My mother's only bumper sticker read, "My Boss Is a Jewish Carpenter." She told anyone who'd listen that she was born again, and her rule for us was simple: "Love anyone God loves," she'd say. "That'd be everyone, no exceptions."

Days before my mother died, she grabbed my hand and assured me she was ready to meet Jesus. Were she alive today, she would not have voted for Issue 1.

"No exceptions," she would have said.

I learned from my mother that those who are most secure in their faith feel no need to hammer others with their certainty. The walk of faith begins and ends with the journey within, and that's a path fraught with mystery and best guesses. My own faith makes me neither right nor righteous because it demands so much of me that I am still trying to find. Empathy, forgiveness, compassion -- I never have enough.

Mom would say that's OK. As I've said before, she taught me that being a Christian meant fixing ourselves and helping others, not the other way around. It's a lifetime of work -- for me, anyway, especially as I try to find a gentle way to respond to those who supported this hateful amendment that rewards only some kinds of love and punishes others. The God I know insists I try, but I do struggle.

Issue 1 advocates insist that gays pose a threat to traditional marriage. A curious claim, when the Bible belt has the highest rate of divorce in the country and Massachusetts, where gay marriage is legal, has the absolute lowest.

The only threat I feel from gays is that so many of these kind and talented members of our community will now leave us.

Who am I to ask them to stay?

A ploy for ratings stripped of pretense

By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Monday November 22, 2004, 12:00 AM

When I finally watched Sharon Reed's naked ploy for ratings last week on WOIO Channel 19, my own reaction surprised me.

I expected to be angry and appalled to watch this news anchorwoman wriggle free of her sexy lingerie for hundreds of thousands of television viewers.

Instead, I felt incredibly sad.

I was sad that local broadcast journalism had hit a new low.

I was sad that so many Clevelanders, including the media, fell for it.

Most of all, I was sad for Sharon Reed.

Reed is a beautiful, smart, highly educated black woman in a profession that would never have hired her 30

years ago. The daughter of two schoolteachers went to Georgetown University, then got her masters at the prestigious Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University.

She had the talent and credentials to force open doors typically held ajar only for perky young blondes and men allowed to age until they're propped upright.

Instead, Reed chose to become, in her words, the first anchorwoman to appear nude on the news. She did this because her two bosses, both middle-age white men, convinced her it would be great for the ratings.

Too bad they didn't care about her career.

Five months ago, news director Stephen Doerr and general manager Bill Applegate asked Reed if she'd agree to be filmed stripping for artist Spencer Tunick's nude group photo shoot here in Cleveland.

I called Doerr and Applegate to ask them why they approached Reed. I'll give Doerr credit for this: He didn't even attempt to mask their motives with praise for Reed's intellect or quick wit.

He said he adores her. "Sharon is a stunningly beautiful woman. We knew what this could do for our ratings."

Why this isn't sexual harassment, I'm not sure. If one of our bosses here called a woman in and asked her to strip for the job, she'd be screaming for a union rep and a good lawyer.

TV's different, Reed said. This is "art."

Applegate didn't return my call.

Reed said it took her about an hour to say yes, and she did it for Doerr.

"There is no one else I would have done this for," she told me. "I love Steve, I adore Steve, I truly trust him with my life and my career. You ask anyone who worked with him before he came here. They will tell you Steve is a god."

Reed actually was filmed at the shoot in June, but the station held the segment until November sweeps, when audience levels determine advertising rates. The station's racy promos paid off: The single broadcast last Monday drew the station its highest ratings ever. It also generated a great deal of national attention - and criticism - Doerr said the station neither expected nor wanted. It also left its newsroom deeply divided.

None of the other editors, reporters and anchors knew about Reed's segment until the week before it aired, and many of them were furious. Channel 19 later televised some of the staff criticism, but the worst never made the air. Some of it has made its way to me, though, and morale is in the tank.

"We should have sought out more opinions," Doerr conceded. "But you also have to understand what it's been like here for Sharon with other women in the newsroom. Some of the stuff they've done to her is the most vicious I've ever seen."

Well, yes, television newsrooms tend to be snake pits, especially when the emphasis is on youth and beauty, and smile lines can be fatal flaws. But it is the Doerrs of the world who insist on replacing veterans with an endless stream of youngsters. And it was this Doerr in particular who, during our interview, referred to a woman in their accounting department as "one of the girls."

Doerr and Reed both said he repeatedly asked her if she was sure about running the video.

"Right up to the day before we aired it, I told her we'd pull it if she wanted to," Doerr said.

"He kept asking, 'Are you OK? Are you OK?' " Reed said. "I kept saying, 'Yes. I trust your judgment.' "

That's an awful lot of hovering for a man who insists he knew what was best for the woman he adores.

Rule on wife's role bends only for him

By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Monday December 13, 2004, 12:00 AM

This business of preserving traditional marriage keeps getting messier and messier. Now, we've got to go after married people committing "deliberate childlessness."

Or so we are supposed to believe after an Associated Press story that ran in more than 100 newspapers around the country, including this paper. The man behind the cause is Bryce Christensen, whom AP identified only as "a Southern Utah University professor who writes frequently about family issues."

The attack on couples who choose not to have children was a flash point for a lot of women, and for good reason. They intuited what the story did not report: Christensen's real target is women.

Christensen writes regularly for the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, a conservative organization whose chief grievance is that women have abandoned their biblically mandated roles as homemakers for the work force. And blaming career women for the lack of "completed gestation" in their marriages is only the beginning of Christensen's rant.

Working mothers' children are "semi-orphans" languishing in day care and after-school programs. By middle school, they become adolescent criminals vandalizing malls.

Working wives are the reason two-income couples have bid home prices out of reach for single-income families.

They demean and humiliate their husbands, too, and rob other men of a "family wage" that could keep their wives at home.

In Christensen's view, working women aren't even very nice because their focus on jobs and careers has extinguished women's "traditionally feminine" virtues of "care and sensitivity."

I guess it was all so much better when we lived on farms and the womenfolk knew their place - in the home, performing a "score of productive skills" such as cooking, spinning thread and weaving cloth, and making their own candles, soap and buttons.

If only Christensen were living the life he preaches. But like so many hellbent on bending others to their version of hell, his rules worked until they didn't.

So he changed them. Just this once.

His wife, it turns out, works outside the home.

"She stayed at home with our three sons until our youngest was in sixth grade," he said, his voice halting. "She felt he didn't need her at home as much."

He bristled at the reminder that it was he who identified that as the age when "semi-orphaned" kids of working mothers begin committing crimes.

"I don't claim we're charting the ideal pattern for all couples," he said. "Our circumstances had changed."

What changed, said his wife, was that they needed more money.

Mary Christensen went back to teaching high school after it became clear that her husband's income would not "meet our expectations," she said. She worked part time for one year, then went full time.

As she spoke, at first, she parroted her husband.

"I resented that society put me in the position where I had to go back to work," she said. "I remember a time

when cars were \$3,000, houses were \$27,000. But banks started taking second incomes as collateral, and that priced so many out of a home."

Then her voice softened.

"Did I want to go back to work? Yes. Yes I did." She talked about why.

She could finally buy a second car. She could help her husband maintain their current lifestyle.

She loves to cook, and likes teaching cooking. And she didn't have to worry too much about her kids because they were in an after-school swimming program.

"That way they didn't come home to an empty house while I was at work," she said.

Just like the working moms her husband regularly attacks, Mary Christensen adapted. And her sons thrived.

When asked about her husband's rage toward working mothers, she sighed.

"One of the things you need to realize is that, if the wife goes back to work, there are problems that have to be dealt with. My house is still clean, for example, but it isn't neat the way I like it. You come down to choices." She sighed again.

"I've decided I can live with it messy."

Merry Christmas everyone - or else

By Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist

Thursday December 16, 2004, 12:00 AM

When did corporate America become responsible for my Christmas cheer?

In my 47 years on this earth, it has never occurred to me that I should look to advertising or store clerks for affirmation of my faith. That's what church is for. Family and friends are handy for that, too, not to mention the little miracles of daily living.

Newspapers around the country, though, are full of stories about disgruntled Christians insisting that their Christmas is spoiled because cashiers don't say "Merry Christmas" anymore. They're also grumbling that store ads have dropped "Merry Christmas," trumpeting "Happy Holidays" and "Season's Greetings" instead.

A California group is boycotting Macy's and its corporate parent, Federated Department Stores, accusing them of banning "Merry Christmas" signs, even though the companies insist they have no such ban.

In Raleigh, N.C., a church pledging to keep "Christ in Christmas" paid \$7,000 that could have clothed the poor and fed the homeless to place a full-page ad in the Nov. 24 issue of The News and Observer newspaper.

"Attention Christians!" began the ad, which then urged "all Christians to spend their hard-earned dollars with merchants who include the greeting 'Merry Christmas' in their holiday advertising promotions this Christmas."

A lot of readers objected to the ad, in part because it also pointed out that only 5 percent of Americans celebrate Hanukkah and 2 percent celebrate Kwanzaa. In other words, we're bigger than they are - they being Jews and African-Americans - so let's start acting like it and throw our weight around.

I'm confused.

If we really want to go after what corporate America has done to Christmas, shouldn't we stop buying all these - dare I say it? - things?

If what we long for is the Christmas of yore, shouldn't we return to the days of baked goods tied up with bows and presents no larger than stockings hung by the chimney with care?

Threatening to withhold our Visa or MasterCard only until they say what we want them to say doesn't strike me as getting us any closer to the manger.

I'm also trying to figure out why store clerks should have to make me feel good about Christmas.

When I shop, I have to wait at their counter for 10, maybe 15 minutes, tops. They have to stand there all day.

I make a generous living and have health care. They rarely make a living wage and most have no benefits.

I'll get the whole week off. At best, they get only Christmas Day, and then they're back for the mobs on Dec. 26.

Seems to me I can afford to take the lead on Christmas cheer.

I want to live my faith, not enforce it, and I can start by remembering there's a beating heart beneath every store smock and name tag. We get plenty of reminders on that one, especially during this season of giving.

Last week, for example, I stood in line and watched a middle-aged woman with a Christmas angel pinned to her lapel berate two young clerks because the store didn't have her favorite brand of gum.

"I've been in here three times in the last week, and three times you haven't had it," she hissed, pointing to the rack that held dozens of other brands of gum. "This is outrageous."

The clerks apologized several times. Her only response was to threaten never to return to that store if they didn't stock her gum. I was willing to lead a round of applause on that one, but they just continued to apologize and assured her they would order it that very day.

Those two clerks taught me a lot about the spirit of Christmas. They reminded me that we keep the Christ in Christmas every time we're kind when we want to be angry, generous when we want to be selfish, patient when we want to scream.

We don't find joy by demanding it, and I for one have no interest in joining the faith police. Insisting on carols while we shop and clerks chirping "Merry Christmas" at the checkout counter suggests a fragile faith, one that could fall prey to corporate control.

Surely, the spirit of Christmas is stronger than that.

Death of a plant can kill the soul

*BY: Connie Schultz/Plain Dealer Columnist
February 8, 2009 Sunday*

Steve Parker loved the Lord so much that he used to whistle gospel music on the factory floor.

"He was a deacon in his church," his daughter, Alicia Kammler, said, "but people turned to him like he was a minister. He refused to see the bad in a person. If somebody did something bad, he'd say, 'There has to be an explanation for it.' If someone was mean to him at the plant, he'd pray for them."

Parker worked at the auto parts plant that Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. operated in Jackson, Ohio, for nearly four decades. When Goodyear pulled out in the mid-1990s, life in this region of Appalachia began to wither. The factory changed hands, closed at least once, then reopened as Meridian Automotive Systems.

In 2006, labor contract negotiations stalled over health care. That April, Meridian locked out nearly 350 union members and replaced them with non-union workers.

Just like that, the 51-year-old Parker was without a job.

"It was like Dad lost his whole family," Kammler said. "These guys started right out of high school. He'd been there 30 years. It was the only job he knew."

Parker was the sole breadwinner for his family. For months, he hunted for a job that would pay the bills. He worked the night shift at a Wal-Mart distribution center, but it taxed his soul.

"I'm a grown man," he told his daughter. "I can't stand there and do the chants they make us do."

"Dad," she said, "a job does not define you." He smiled and winked at her. That was his way.

Parker grew more withdrawn. He couldn't sleep, and couldn't talk about the reasons why.

"It wasn't his way to talk about his problems," Kammler said. "He always thought it was his job to make others happy."

On Sunday morning, July 15, 2007, Kammler was getting ready for church when her mother called in a panic.

"You have to get here right now," she said. "Right away. Something's wrong with Dad."

Kammler, the first college graduate in the family, is a nurse practitioner. When she saw her father crouched on the floor, squeezing his head, she knew.

"He was catatonic," she said. "He was delusional from sleep deprivation and depression."

He curled into a fetal position in the back seat of the car and recited a paraphrase from the Bible all the way to the hospital: A man who does not provide for his family is no better than an infidel. . . . A man who does not provide for his family is no better than an infidel. . . .

After two days of drugs and doctors, Parker went home. His family removed the guns from the house, but they forgot about the handgun at his mother's home just down the road, where he visited every single day.

Parker saw his mother that morning, then said he was going for a walk.

It took two days and more than 100 volunteers to find his body in the woods.

A month later, Meridian closed the factory for good.

Parker's death sucked the air out of Jackson. And when Meridian left, "it took out a part of our heart," Mayor

Randy Heath said.

"A lot of the people who worked at Meridian were community leaders. That plant touched every walk of life."

The empty factory now looms like a tomb over 250,000 square feet in the center of town.

"A building is a building," Heath said. "Just because they build here doesn't mean they're tied here."

Heath knows there are towns like his all across America.

He also knows that they don't make for the kind of flashy headlines coming out of Wall Street.

"Some don't understand what life is like in places like Jackson," he said. "It's an everyday challenge for people here. We tell ourselves, 'I've got to succeed every day so that my family has what it needs. I can't afford a single failure.' "

Kammler said townspeople still stop her to share a story about her dad. It helps, but only a little.

"I cling to my faith," she said.

Some nights, when the pain is too great, she falls to the floor and recites the shortest of prayers: "God, I'm broken."