

Protest doesn't excuse acts to harm free speech

It's a scary thing that a lot of people, especially veterans, came to the support of a Marion man caught following members of a dissident Topeka church around Mulvane with a couple of guns.

At first, Ryan Newell, 26, who lost both legs in Afghanistan, told sheriff's officers he was providing security for members of the Westboro Baptist Church. They let him go. Then someone asked church members about their "security detail."

Later, Sedgwick County sheriff's officers found him parked headed-out in a garage across the street from where church members were meeting with Wichita police officials about security. He had guns and ammunition with him.

Members of the church have a decades-long campaign against homosexuality that began with pickets of those they considered "enablers" of gay rights. Later, that morphed into protests at the funerals of more than 600 servicemen members killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The church claims these deaths are God's punishment for America.

It goes without saying that this group is about as popular as mud with veterans, veterans groups and other patriotic organizations. Groups including the American Legion Riders have organized to peaceably block Westboro protests and keep them away from the family at funerals. Emotions run high.

After Mr. Newell was arrested and charged with misdemeanor counts including stalking, people across the country began to call and offer to pay his legal expenses. That's

admirable, we suppose, but we hope these "patriots" weren't in any way condoning his actions, planned or actual.

The ex-soldier was, after all, lying in wait for the Westboro group with three weapons, a combat rifle, a pistol and a revolver. We can only guess what he intended to do.

Worse yet, after state and federal officers searched his home, he was charged with a felony count of conspiracy, which implies that others helped him or put him up to whatever misdeeds he had planned.

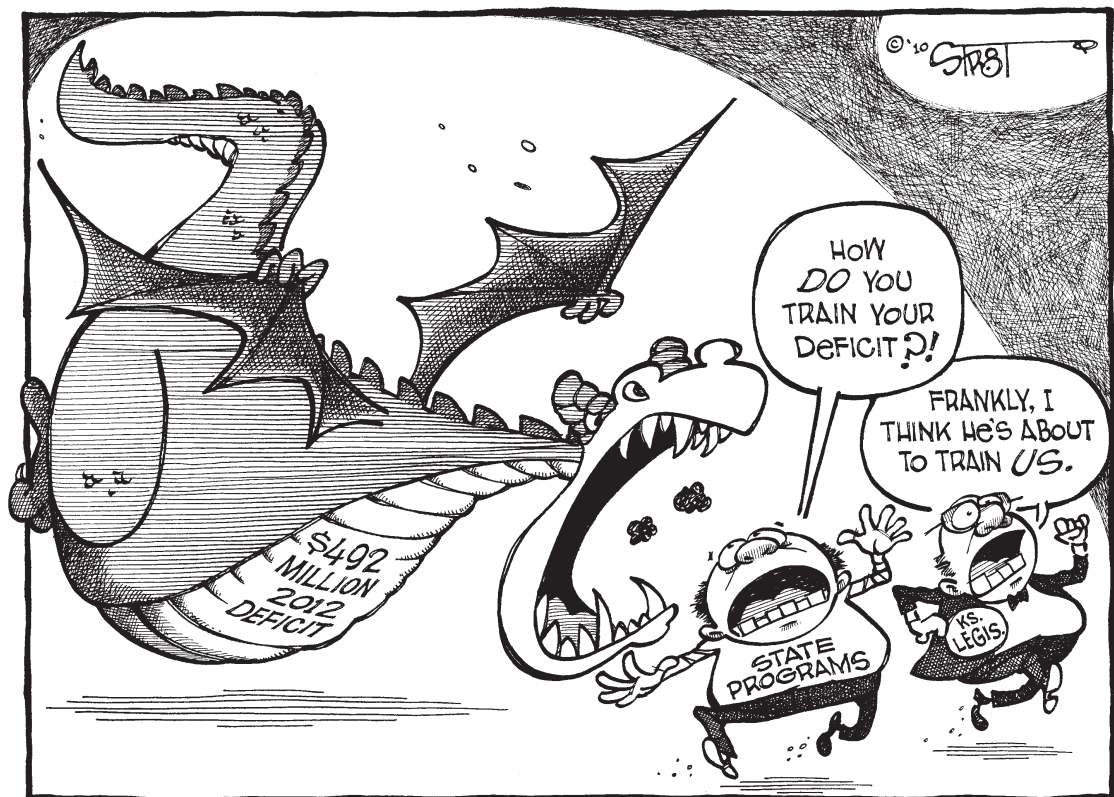
No one in Kansas is proud of the Westboro gang or its cause. They are an obnoxious wart on the pretty face of our fair state. But nothing more.

They express an opinion that, while grossly unpopular, is theirs to hold. Few agree with them; fewer still support them. But under our Bill of Rights, they are allowed not only to have weird thoughts, but to express them.

The right to freedom of speech and assembly, protected by the First Amendment, is among those we're told our veterans fight to protect. It's part of the American Way.

We never felt that mayhem or murder were among the rights veterans fought for. You have to believe in this case, those could have been the outcome had not a few sheriff's officers asked some pointed questions.

One thing we do believe is that Mr. Newell is innocent until proven guilty. Anyone who wants to help him defend himself, that is their right. We hope just none of them means to endorse his actions, which pretty clearly go beyond the pall. — Steve Haynes



Christmas is just starting up

The Christmas shopping season is winding down and the religious season is getting started.

It seems that many of us don't realize that Christmas Day is the start of the season, not the end.

Out in the world of commerce, busy shoppers are picking up those last-minute presents for friends and loved ones. Those same shoppers, in the Christmas spirit, are putting money in Salvation Army kettles, getting gifts for those on "angel trees" and donating to the 101 charities that have their hands out at this time of year.

In church, though, the season of Advent is winding down.

Advent, the season before Christmas, is not just a calendar with a piece of candy behind each day leading up to the big present party on Dec. 25. It's supposed to be a period of prayer and reflection on the birth and life of Jesus.

While manger scenes go up in churches all over the country, many don't put the Christ child in his makeshift crib until services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

This is when the real Christmas season begins.



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
c.haynes@nwkansas.com

As Santa Claus takes off his coat and boots and the elves feed the reindeer and put the sleigh away, Christmas is just getting started.

This is a joyous time of year, a celebration of birth and renewal.

The angels have sung their song, the shepherds have checked things out and Mary and Joseph have settled down to feed, change and care for their new baby.

But there are still people coming in to see this new little one.

Some were probably like us. They just want to see a tiny, new human being and congratulate the parents.

Others probably heard about strange doings the night this kid was born and are really curious to see what all the fuss was about. They probably went away still wondering

who would make such a fuss about a nobody family staying in a stable, for goodness sakes.

The Christmas season continues through Epiphany, which commemorates the day wise men from the East came to see the new king of the Jews and do him homage.

Then, those busybodies really had something to talk about, but they still probably couldn't figure out what the heck was going on.

The liturgical Christmas season doesn't end until the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John the Baptist in mid-January, about a week after the Epiphany.

By then, it would probably have been a good idea to take out the real tree and put the blow-up Santas away.

So Merry Christmas to you!

There's still time for lights

I wouldn't say we are totally "bah-humbugs" this year, because we've been to a couple of fun Christmas parties and I've been making candy like crazy, but we haven't had the "umph" to put up lights or decorate.

And, if you've ever seen Jim's light displays, you know it's not like him to sit out a season. There's a few days left, so we still have time to get in the Christmas mood.

We have to remember that not everyone loves the holidays, especially when it seems like everyone else in the world is happy. It can be a sad time for those who've recently lost a loved one; are far from family or having financial issues.

Some people feel very alone. There couldn't be a better time to reach out to someone.

Jim's father lives in a long-term care facility, but he remains alert and in good spirits. Our visits always seem to bring a laugh, and he looks forward to the cheese we "sneak" into him. It's a little pleasure he loves.

He still has that spark for a good joke, too. I was standing beside his bed when he said, "Come a little closer." When I leaned over, he sat up and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. Then, leaned back and had a good laugh like he had really pulled one over on me.

"Dad, I don't think I got any of my orneriness from you," Jim said, "cause you still have all of yours."

I hope he never loses it.

It's been said that you shouldn't



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
quality-pro@webtv.net

fly faster than your guardian angel. Well, I wasn't driving too fast but my guardian angel had to do some pretty speedy maneuvering.

Jim got a job putting a metal roof on a home about 30 miles away and I am his "ground man." That just means I'm the "gopher." I go for the power cord, I go for the screw gun, I go for the ridge cap, I go for everything. Still, it's better than being on the roof.

Anyway, we were on our way home one afternoon and I was driving the pickup. We were on a flat stretch of road and there was only one vehicle in sight. A late model, bright, red Chevy pickup truck appeared in the oncoming lane.

Suddenly, that pickup drifted over into my lane and kept coming. I thought, surely the driver would correct and get back into their lane, but the truck kept coming and coming until I had no choice but to head for the ditch.

The driver (and, I hate to admit it was a woman) was still talking on her cell phone when she went past us, still in our lane. She drove about a quarter of a mile before she got back over into her lane.

I'm not sure she was even aware of how close she came not only to killing herself, but of killing us too.

We considered calling the police, but without a license tag number or a positive ID of the driver, we knew nothing could be done. I just hope she reads this, comes to understand how dangerous her actions were and vows to never do anything foolish like that again.

We finished the roofing job we were working on but, not before Jim vowed it would be the last roofing job he would take. He had to admit his 60-plus-year-old legs just couldn't handle the stress.

The good news is Jim found a young man to help finish the job. And, what a help he was. Earl scrambled up and down that roof like a pro, putting in screws, attaching the ridge cap and finishing the trim.

Earl doesn't know it but, Jim doesn't give out compliments like that too freely. It's not every day that someone can keep up with Jim when he's working.

Here's wishing you a very Merry Christmas. May it be all you want it to be. When you're seated at your family table, gathered 'round a card table or eating alone at a lunch counter, bow your head and say a little thank you to God.

Colleges must tighten the rules

The Kansas Board of Regents' Qualified Admissions Task Force is proposing new standards for Kansas high school graduates to enter state universities.

The task force wants to increase course requirements, but then leave the gates wider open to students who do not meet them.

Kansas was the last state with open admissions a decade ago. Graduate from a Kansas high school and you could enter any state university. The first Qualified Admissions standards went into effect for Kansas high school students graduating in May 2001.

A student had to take the pre-college curriculum, or achieve a composite score of 21 on the ACT, or have a combined SAT of 980, or rank in the top one-third of their graduating class.

Students who could not meet any of the above could still be admitted in a "10 percent window" that is, 10 percent of enrollment could come from students who did not meet any of these criteria. The University of Kansas barely uses 3 percent, but several regional universities nearly "max out" the full 10.

At first glance, the new proposed criteria appear to kick up the requirements. Kansas high school graduates now must all take a new fortified pre-college curriculum and then meet one of the test or class-rank criteria.

The new curriculum still contains four units of English and three units of natural sciences. Three units of social science must come from U.S. history (1), U.S. government (½), world history or geography or international relations (½), and one unit from among various psychology, civics and economics options.

A bigger change is in math, requiring four years with one unit during the senior year or three units of math and an ACT math score showing college readiness. Finally, the task force added three additional



Education Frontlines

By John Richard Schrock

units of electives selected from a range of courses including career and technical education. This is all solidly supported by the ACT study released Oct. 6, "Mind the Gaps: How College Readiness Narrows Achievement Gaps in College Success."

But to address superintendents' concerns that this curriculum will force widespread consolidation among rural districts, the task force is expanding the 10 percent "window" to 15 percent of Kansas graduates that do not meet the standards.

This bigger window is the wrong policy at the wrong time in Kansas history. The academically-able students of Kansas are already paying too much in tuition at state schools because the state's limited tuition support is spread too thin across students who are not college-able.

This is a time to reduce the window, not throw it wide open.

Sixty percent of incoming freshmen require some remedial instruction, says a report released in June. Selective four-year colleges that require a high school college prep curriculum and high grades or test scores only have 10-15 percent needing help. However, half of students at nonselective state universities are not college-ready, and three-fourths of students at two-year colleges need remedial courses.

This is backed up by the ACT, which finds only one-fourth of Kansas test-takers are college-ready. In Kansas, about 74 percent of high school seniors take the ACT test.

Students who drop out after just

one year of college (between 2003-2008) have cost Kansas taxpayers over \$93 million, according to a study by the American Institute for Research. According to the Oct. 20 Education Week, "cost of educating students who drop out after one year accounts for 2 percent to 8 percent of states' total higher education appropriations...."

Higher admission requirements will increase retention, save tax money, lower tuition for the college-able, and prevent inappropriate pressure on universities to inflate grades.

But opening the exception "window" to 15 percent completely undermines these goals. Instead, a "hard 21" ACT requirement should be phased in over the next 10 years for all U.S. students entering or transferring to Kansas state universities, reducing the 10 percent window by 1 percent per year.

From the Bible

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.
Romans: 7: 17-18

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Office hours: 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Mon. - Fri.
Phone: (785) 475-2206 Fax (785) 475-2800
E-mail: oberlin.herald@nwkansas.com

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Reader appreciates legislator

To the Editor:

Jerry Moran is a true statesman because he really cares for each and every Kansan. His listening tour has already begun. As the new U.S. senator, he plans to hold town-hall meetings in all 105 counties over the next two years. This means that he will continue to listen to Kansans, just like he always has.

Our Constitution gives each citizen a job to do. That is to keep in contact with our elected officials,

Letter to the Editor

to let them know how we feel about certain issues, and to thank them for their hard work on our behalf.

Jerry wants and needs to hear from you. His official Senate website is www.jerrymoran.house.gov.

His northwest Kansas office is in Hays at Box 1128. The phone (785) 628-6401 and the fax (785)

628-3791
Kansas can look forward to the next six years. Jerry will continue to represent us with honesty and integrity. When it is Decatur County's turn for his listening tour, I hope the room is full.
Marcia Lohofener, Oberlin