

Silence of the Goose

Any news organization that regularly reports on governmental bodies of any sort, be they law enforcement agencies, elected bodies or school districts will ruffle feathers. It comes with the territory.

And we're aware that we've ruffled the feathers of the Baytown school district over the case of Armando Kelley, whose autistic, non-verbal son was the subject of a district police investigation.

Basically, after more than two months of trying to get answers from the school and district about the investigation and the teacher accused of hitting his son, Mr. Kelley walked into The Baytown Sun office and asked for help. We listened, and then asked the district questions based on the father's claims and district police report.

• "Mr. Kelley says he cannot get the principal to speak to him. Is that unusual in these types of cases during investigations?"

• "Mr. Kelley claims his child is still being taught by the teacher in question. Is that normal when an investigation is ongoing into a teacher abuse incident?"

• "In the police report, it says cameras are in the classroom, but not working. Is the district aware of this? Why were they not working?"

• "Has there been a conclusion made in this case yet?"

So, imagine our surprise when, in response, we received a "friendly reminder:"

"Goose Creek CISD does not respond to interview questions submitted via email ... We ask that your questions via email be limited to no more than three, if possible."

No subsequent follow up on the father's grievances or any answers to clarify the situation — just a generic "check our policy" response.

One man's story begets another story: school district stonewalling.

After the first story ran last weekend, the school barred Mr. Kelley's second grade son from school Monday morning. "Ambushed" by the principal and district personnel, the father says.

We asked more questions.

• "Can you confirm that Mr. Kelley was prevented by the principal and district administrators from dropping off his son today at James Bowie?"

• "Is the district investigating why Mr. Kelley's child was not allowed to go to school on Monday?"

On Tuesday, Mr. Kelley's son was welcomed back to school, but the tension remains and no explanation for the flip-flop.

A critical test for how well a public agency is performing is how it manages mistakes and criticism and how it communicates about them with the public. Thus, the answers to these questions remain important to Mr. Kelley and his family, and now a watching community at large.

Yet, even today, Mr. Kelley's quest for answers concerning the investigation, who is teaching his son each day goes on.

On Friday, Mr. Kelley said this to say about his ordeal:

"I'm getting sick of feeling like me and my son are suspects. Today I didn't see Ms. Sims but there was a Goose Creek police officer there at drop off. I haven't done anything differently. I drop off my son, pick up my son and never cause an incident. But since this article, it's like I'm public enemy No. 1 and that's very insulting. All I've ever tried to do is discuss whatever happened and find a safe plan moving forward but they chose not to talk and still not talking. I have been completely disrespected since the beginning."

So, what do we intend to do about all this?

Nothing differently.

We are going to do exactly as we've always done. When we are writing a story involving Goose Creek CISD, we will reach out to them for comment. They can answer us, not answer us. But we'll continue to ask them questions, file open records requests, and do those things news organizations do routinely.

In truth, the ongoing stories about the district investigation and subsequent treatment of Mr. Kelley's son was largely avoidable had the district worked with the father after we informed them of the problems. Instead, the district has ignored his issues, the questions which led to stories that make the school and district look uncaring — even worse.

But there's still time to fix this mess and for the district to take ownership for the hard feelings that exist.

Here's another question:

• What will the district do now?

We hope it's the right thing. It's not too late to apologize to Mr. Kelley and his family. — David Bloom

Wedding vows recited for real at theater

"And the groom may now kiss the bride ..."

There they were in the real time of the Great Depression, the newly pronounced man and wife — in real life -- on stage at the Arcadia Theater in Old Baytown.

Every June the local ceremony drew a packed crowd including many (maybe most) who didn't even know the bride and groom but, along with the couple's close kin and friends, wouldn't miss this wedding for the world.

Forget the on-screen actors of that era. Make-believe movie stars like blonde bombshell Jean Harlowe, singing cowboy Gene Autry and tree-swinging Johnny "Me Tarzan" Weismuller couldn't compete with the attention given the bride and groom starring — in person! -- at the Arcadia.

The theater, built by Howard Brunson, and The Daily Sun, helmed by Bob Matherne, sponsored the ceremony with a whole lot of help from merchants donating wedding gifts. The community-wide event



WANDA ORTON

provided a true story with a happy ending, a welcomed distraction from the Depression in the 1930s.

Advance publicity in The Sun gave updates on gifts being collected.

For example, from the front page June 4, 1937, readers learned that the most recent donations were from Frank Farmer and Otto Huddle. Owner of the Sunset Radio Shop, Farmer offered a 10 percent discount on a Westinghouse electric refrigerator. This could be used as a down payment, the story stated, and there would be no charge for moving the box into the couple's home. In addition, The Sun reported that Huddle had marched into the newspaper office to announce he would provide a free wash and grease job from his auto service station.

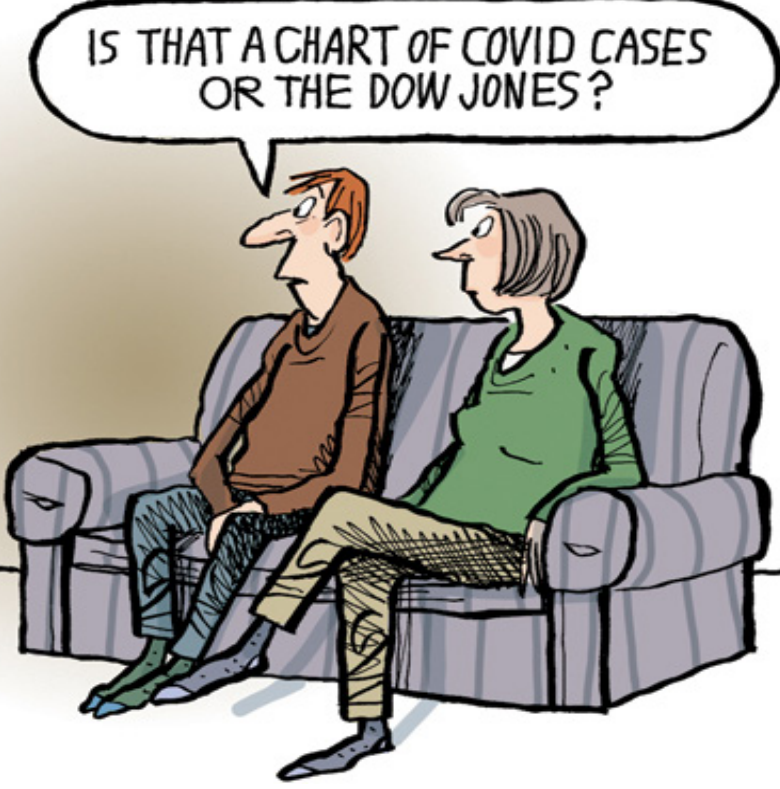
Among gifts listed previously in The Sun were a photo of the future

bride by the Tri-Cities Studio, flowers for the ceremony by the Tri-City Nursery, six-month pass to the Arcadia Theater, quart of milk delivered daily for a month by the Cooper Dairy, electric iron from M. Harvey, a \$10 machine-less wave by the Betty Jean Beauty Shop, basket of groceries from Grenader's food market, marriage license and cookbook from County Clerk Henry Dudley, free dinner for bridal party at the Elite Café, cleaning and pressing coupon at Wright's Cleaners, silk gown for the bride from the Rainbow Shop, 12-inch oscillating fan from Lack's Auto Supply and a box of silk hose from Brownbilt Shoe Store.

Interestingly, John and Erna Beth Foxworth, married on stage at the movie theater in 1935, became the parents of film and TV star Robert Foxworth.

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

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Oh, say can you see because of John Reiter?

(DISCERNING READER ALERT: This column was first published on Jan. 24, 2016.)

Strange — or maybe eerie is a better word — how this nutty world we live in can change so suddenly.

I can prove it.

John Reiter No. 2 as I call him, the son of John Reiter No. 1, was standing near the serve-yourself ice cream dispenser at El Toro.

Wife Margie and I had just finished our traditional Saturday night date there (we dig the Poco Peso with a side order of onions and catsup) and were going to stop for some of Baytown's finest ice cream (El Toro's) when I spotted John, who I hadn't seen in ages.

After exchanging pleasantries, I asked how John No. 1, the one-time super-star eyeglass engineer, now nearing his 97th birthday, was doing.

"Pretty good," John No. 2 responded.

Well, I said, next time you talk to him, tell him I said hello and that I love him.

"Will do," No. 2 replied.

Fast forward a couple of weeks.

My glasses were really loose, bouncing around my noggin — probably because my head is shrinking with old age — and I needed help. I know, I'll visit John No. 2 at Reiter Opticians and maybe he can weld them or use spackle, or something, anything, to make them tighter.

As is the norm when you go to the Reiter shop, I was greeted by the friendly, welcoming Bitsi Rose, who, for income tax purposes, also



JIM FINLEY

his dad had died.

I hadn't, and was immediately filled with sadness.

The surviving John filled in the details.

John The Elder, who founded Reiter Opticians in 1956 and moved into the current Texas Avenue store in 1957, passed away in Apopka, Fla., while living with another son, Barry, and family.

After so many years as a Baytown fixture — big in church, big in Kiwanis — a serious head injury stemming from a bicycle accident, the loss of his precious wife Bernie, and severe damage to his Dayton home caused by Hurricane Ike, John would spend his remaining days in Florida.

I have such great memories of John and so little space to expound. Most of those memories are humorous, coming from the man who wore trademark bow ties and had a keen, dry sense of humor.

Like, when I was an Assistant Congressional Executive (ACE), John called me "Senator." And, boy, did he call me.

"Senator, is Congressman [Jack] Fields going along with that nutty spending proposal put forth by Tip

O'Neill? He better not!"

Later, he would call me about columns I'd done, once accusing me of being "too repetitious."

Once when I wrote about a car I DIDN'T get for Christmas when I was a teen, John telephoned and asked, "Senator, was it a 4- or 6-cylinder?"

Like I even knew what a cylinder was?

What a fun, charitable (most of it done anonymously) personage he was.

Fortunately, John No. 2 got to visit with his papa between Christmas and New Year's, and while they didn't know it at the time, it turned out to be a wonderful farewell for both.

"Not many 58-year-old guys can sit for three days, drinking some beer, and visiting with their 96-year-old dad," No. 2 said, thankful that the Great Optician In The Sky had given them this special moment.

"We didn't watch TV. We just talked for three days.

"Dad told me he was ready to go see his Bernie, and I know he missed mom so much. He said he was tired."

And so it came to pass. John and Bernie are together again.

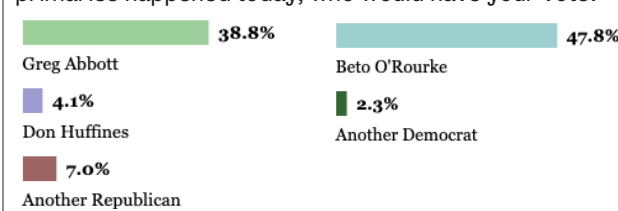
Now, I don't know if people wear eyeglasses in heaven, but if they do, you just know John is involved somehow.

Wearing a bow tie and cracking jokes.

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

Baytown Sun Weekly Survey

Last week, readers were asked, "If the gubernatorial primaries happened today, who would have your vote?"



This week's question: "If you had one wish for Baytown that would come true tomorrow, what would it be?" Respond at www.baytownsun.com

On this date:
In 1968, the Tet Offensive began during the Vietnam War as Communist forces launched surprise attacks against South Vietnamese towns and cities; although the Communists were beaten back, the offensive was seen as a major setback for the U.S.

TODAY IN HISTORY
and its allies.
In 1981, an estimated 2 million New Yorkers turned out for a ticker tape parade honoring the American hostages freed from Iran.
In 2020, health officials reported

the first known case in which the new coronavirus was spread from one person to another in the United States. President Donald Trump described the handful of U.S. cases of the virus as a "very little problem" and said those people were "recovering successfully."

The Baytown Sun
Main office:
281-422-8302 • Fax: 281-427-5252
1301 Memorial Drive, Baytown

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