Opinion

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Hey, parents — you hold the key

SHOCKING? INDEED!

Everyone who gives a darn about the Farmington area's well-being should be alarmed when 73 percent of the liquor-licensed establishments are ticketed for allegedly selling liquor to minors.

Officers recently completed an undercover sweep using teen-aged police cadets. All 90 liquor-licensed businesses were visited; 66 were ticketed.

Predictably, police tactics angered some of those who were ticketed.

A major complaint was that the female cadet looked like a 30-year-old, not 19. That raises the prickly question of whether license holders should check identification for every patron, even if older patrons are offended, or just those who "look" underage.

Another complaint was that teenagers aren't likely to frequent pricier establishments. That's a point worth weighing in future licensing sweeps, although it's conceivable well-dressed, 20-year-olds could try to gain admittance to a fancier nightspot.

DEBATE ABOUT methodology, however, shouldn't obscure that the Michigan Liquor Control Commission fixes responsibility for serving liquor squarely on the license holders.

In truth, guarding against underage drinking is the responsibility of everyone — licensees, police, parents, even young people themselves.

Not watching idly, Farmington Public Schools have tried to point up the dangers of alcoholism through substance abuse programs presented by such parental support groups as Families in Action.

Don't sell such support teams short. It's mom and dad who hold the key to real behavioral change among their kids.

Parents who condone or ignore underage drinking, or who overindulge at home or while driving, set an example hardly worth emulating — but, unfortunately, one that too often is.

BUT EVEN teetotaling parents have to stand sentry. Social pressures and low self-esteem can just as easily prompt their children to seek solace in alcohol.

Make no mistake: Use of alcohol by teens is the norm, not the exception. When young people party on weekends, they're often unchaperoned. And booze is still the drug of choice.

Chief William Dwyer says Farmington Hills police have learned that 75 percent of this area's high school students drink on weekends.

Farmington Superintendent of Schools Graham Lewis doesn't know if that percentage is accurate. But he agrees the problem of easy availability is real — real enough to hold an inservice last year so district employees could better identify substance abuse signs and refer serious cases to support services.

Peer pressure can be relentless. No matter what the police, the schools or even parents do, whether young people are baited by the lure of alcohol often hinges on their individual makeup.

STILL, WIDESPREAD change won't happen until parents recognize the pivotal role they must play.

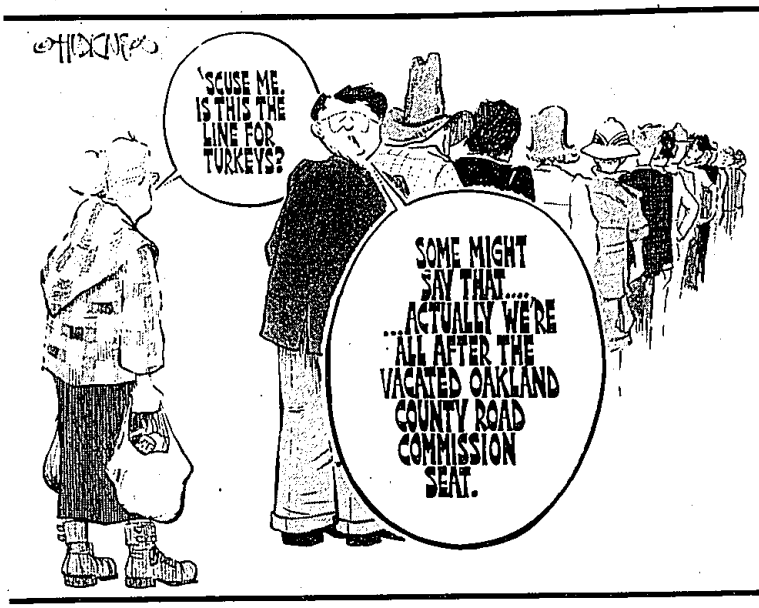
They must start by pulling their heads from the sand and assessing their own approach to alcohol.

They then must inspire heart-to-heart conversations with their young charges to pinpoint emotional and social hangups. Compromise is essential. Alternatives must be considered. The best solutions must be pursued, not the easiest.

Clearly, the schools must bear some of the burden for changing student awareness, attitudes and behavior when it comes to alcohol and its deadly face.

But they can't replace the bonds between parents and children — unique bonds weaned over a lifetime.

— Bob Sklar



A chance encounter

Bob Wisler

"Who steals my purse steals trash;
'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his and has been
slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good
name. . . "

THE SWIRL of events surrounding the arrest and death of state Appeals Judge S. Jerome Bronson had, at first glance, the elements of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy.

A judge, a respected member of the community, gets together with a former judge, and out of the conversation comes a plot. The judge offers to sell his legal might for the proper sum. The former judge helps carry out the plot, or did he have another plan in mind, as he claims, to expose corruption?

A third party is involved, the man who will be approached to make the payoff. Outraged, that man goes to the authorities. The inevitable happens. The plot is turned inward. The former judge is threatened with arrest. The judge is arrested. He shoots himself to death on the spacious grounds of his rambling home in prestigious Franklin.

AND, YET, as the details come out, as transcripts of secretly taped conversations are revealed, you find that there are no elaborate motives, no well-thought schemes to make mighty fortunes, no grand Shakespearean words painting a picture of great gain or troubled souls.

There is instead, an almost pathetic attempt to use one's judicial office to make what seems like a paltry sum in context of ruined lives, ruined reputations. And what could be the motivation for the former judge, James Canham of Redford Township, who was labeled "the bagman" by one newspaper? In all the words secretly recordered there is no indication he will get a dime.

If he were guilty, would he not be a partner in profit? Could he possibly have participated in this feeble scheme as a hail-fellow, well-met politician doing a favor for another politician, as one attorney speculated? Or was it a willing participation with the expectation that if this scheme went through, there might be a payoff down the road, or a chance to cash in on yet another case?

THE LITTLE mysteries abound. Why is a bribe of a public official discussed so casually, in such imprecise terms, and the scheme embarked on so cavalierly? Did these men know what they were doing? I've heard clearer conversations and more clever plans between drunks in a bar than took place between attorneys discussing how to fix a case. There is continual mumbling and hemming and hawing and veiled references about "the envelope."

Even the amount of the bribe is never precise or clear. I had always thought that in a bribe, the division of spoils should be precise and direct. Here we have the amount of the bribe discussed and doubled almost as an afterthought.

And the money. State Appeals Judge S. Jerome Bronson supposedly offers to fix a case and suggests the bribe should be $15,000 to $20,000. The money was needed to make some car payments, one of the participants said. It seems almost ludicrous that someone would risk his life's work, his reputation, the heart of his existence for such a paltry amount and for such shallow reasons.

The case involved at least $3.5 million award, without interest. At the rates that attorneys get paid in such cases, the attorney who was approached to make the bribe could receive anywhere from $1.5 million to well past $2 million, with interest.

THERE ARE elements of mystery that may persist long after the event recedes from memory. We may never know exactly what Canham said to Bronson, or Bronson to Canham in that first meeting that set this tragedy into motion. A chance encounter in a bakery is how Canham described it. A shared lunch and then a puny plan to wrest $15,000 to $20,000 from a situation. Or was it a meeting dictated by the fates of the men involved?

Canham and Bronson were men who strove hard to get ahead, to occupy prestigious positions, to enjoy the fruits of success. Striving, ambitious people seem to run into each other and maybe this was the way it was with Bronson and Canham. But what a fateful meeting, what sorrowful results.

Illegitimacy — heart of poverty problem

Tim Richard

THE 1986 campaign got me to thinking about the first time I met the late Jerry Cavanagh 20 years ago. Then Detroit mayor, Cavanagh went on to challenge ex-Governor G. Mennen Williams for the Democratic Senate nomination.

Williams won the primary but lost to Sen. Bob Griffin who had been appointed earlier that year to fill a vacancy caused by the death of Blair Moody. As fate would have it, voters this month picked Griffin to succeed Chief Justice Williams on the state Supreme Court.

Anyway, Cavanagh showed up one day in Kalamazoo, where I toiled, and advocated a welfare state idea widely used in Europe: child allotments — governmental payments to parents for every child.

The idea bombed, and Cavanagh dropped it the next day.

But it became a partial reality. Today state and federal governments pay child allotments, but not to couples. The bulk goes to single mothers for bearing children out of wedlock.

CAVANAGH CAME to mind last week when a panel of mid-level Reagan administrators issued a report deploring lifestyles of the last 20 years.

It linked illegitimacy and drugs to "staggering consequences for us all: greater poverty, more crime, a less educated workforce, mounting demands for government spending, higher taxes, worsening deficits and crises we have only begun to anticipate."

America's illegitimacy rate has been rising steadily for 30 years. Today it's 20 percent overall, 55 percent among blacks and 10 percent among whites.

Most are candidates for permanent welfare.

AS THE EMBATTLED Agnes Mansour last week announced her departure as director of the state Department of Social Services, I recalled an interview with her in Livonia last spring. I asked her why she kept harping on "teen pregnancy," which is at lower rates [illegible] in the 1950s and avoided the word "illegitimacy," the heart of the problem.

She replied that social standards are something which government can't do much about. (She's wrong, of course, but that's the subject for a future column.)

Her boss, Gov. James Blanchard, is pushing a tuition investment plan to guarantee middle-class kids a shot at college, saying Michigan should be the first state to do it.

No wonder. Michigan has some of the highest public university tuitions in America because Mansour's DSS budget is eating up triple the portion of the state budget that it used up 20 years ago. We wouldn't need a special tuition if we weren't diverting billions from colleges and into subsidizing illegitimate births.

OVER THE WEEKEND House Democrats in Washington, with Rep. Sandy Levin, D-Southfield, in the forefront, issued a report deploring the growing numbers of kids living in poverty, doomed to a lives in a socioeconomic cesspool.

It pointed fingers at unemployment and underemployment, but not at the never-married parents who brought so many of the kids into the welfare culture.

In contrast, the Reagan administration report at least tried to get to the cause. It asked governmental agencies to review all programs to determine their impacts on marital stability, parental authority and traditional family values.

Wonder what Jerry Cavanagh would say about family allotments, 1980s style.

Searching for the hero in us

crackerbarrel debate

Steve Barnaby

HEROES ARE human.

That's important to remember in this country where we have relied so heavily on heroes to show us the way.

It would be silly to avoid the subject this week. After all, the big story, the one which everyone is talking about, is the death of Judge Jerome Bronson.

His death is a tough story to write, read or understand. But it is a story, nevertheless, which is on most everyone's mind.

Judge Bronson's death is more than the story about one man. Although his story, alone, is big enough. But it also is the story of all of us who take our ideals and try to transform them onto human beings.

THAT HABIT, of trying to transform our leaders into Olympian figures, is one which saps our strength to survive.

We do it to a variety of leaders— presidents, senators, physicians and teachers, just to name a few.

We also do it to judges.

We insist they be perfect. And when they turn out to be something less than perfect, when they prove to be just like you and me, persons amenable to the pressures and temptations of life, we frown, become disparaging and disillusioned.

But we only are cheating ourselves.

In truth, what makes a person great is the ability, for however short a time, to overcome the frailties built into the human condition and to make a contribution to society in so doing.

Heroes aren't born. They aren't perfect. They're persons who have overcome human obstacles to stand above the crowd. Sometimes it's an obstacle into which they were born. At other times it is a personal obstacle they have to overcome.

But every person who becomes a hero has overcome an obstacle. That's what makes them heroic.

Even more important to remember is that heroes often fail and even more often return to the norm and become victimized by their own personal obstacle.

IF HEROES WERE perfect there would be nothing to admire. It is the struggle to overcome that counts.

While history has treated Ulysses Grant harshly, in reality he very much exemplifies the true meaning of hero. A down-and-out middle-aged soldier, he retired to a tannery after the Mexican War.

But for one significant moment in history, a short three years, he overcame his shortcomings and lived up to an historical challenge. He stopped drinking and led his country through its darkest moment. He out-thought and out-fought the best military minds of his time.

After the Civil War, his conduct was less than commendable. But what a different country we would live in today if Ulysses Grant hadn't overcome his human condition.

Perfect — certainly not. But significant.

I didn't know Jerome Bronson and am loath to pass judgment, now. But I'll bet you one thing. Somewhere, sometime, if even for just a moment in time, he was a hero to someone.

And that's a standard to which we all should strive.