

POINTS OF VIEW

A pair of warm stories to bowl you over

After I moved to this office a month and a half ago, I wrote a column about me, what I knew about your town and asking folks to give me a call or stop by to let me know about this community.

What a nice surprise. Many, many of you have called or visited the office. People from all walks of life — a couple of legislators, a school board member, a councilwoman, a minister, a retiree and more — stopped in to chat. I've gotten around and visited some meetings, groups and events and been welcomed graciously. And I've gotten plenty of welcoming phone calls, many from people I know but I had forgotten lived in the Farmington.

A couple of those told me stories about themselves and their lives. Two of them reminded me of a holiday best-seller from several years back called "Chicken Soup for the Soul," which featured stories that plucked at heart-strings with tales of poignancy,

irony and spirit.

To me, the following local stories belong in such a book:

■ As I answered the phone, a woman's voice was welcoming me to Farmington and telling me that she hadn't talked to me in years — but watched me grow up. As she identified herself as the aunt of one of my best and oldest friends, my mind almost immediately clicked back to remember that her husband had been killed just over a year before in a hunting accident.

He was an avid sportsman and, as I remember, a big softball slugger who played on our recreation league team. Most importantly, he was a husband and father of three children. His wife told me about how she took their children to Florida last Christmas to visit her sister's family and try to get over their grief.

This year, their first Christmas at home without a husband and father, was especially tough. Their teenage



DAVE VARGA

■ A couple of them told me stories about themselves and their lives. Two of them reminded me of a holiday best-seller from several years back called "Chicken Soup for the Soul."

son, though, took the holiday season as a way to make a sort of Christmas light shrine to dad.

Turns out just before his hunting trip, father and son had talked about

decorating the house with tons of lights, kind of like the "Home Improvement" episode where Tim goes overboard with decorations to outdo his neighbors.

Now that dad is gone, mom said, her son decided to tackle the project himself. "It's incredible, he must have 4,000 lights out there," she told me. "He had the entire top of the house outlined in lights so that dad could look down from heaven and see."

■ An old contact from my reporting days — let's call him Bill — called me to say, "Hi," after seeing my picture in the paper. We caught up on our personal lives; I told Bill how fast my girls were growing up, he updated me on his now young adult sons. He mentioned how he was remarried now, after his wife died of cancer four years ago.

I remember Bill telling me back then about his wife's suffering, how they were hoping for a miracle with a specialist in Houston and the difficult

rollercoaster of treatment, remission and pain.

After she was gone, Bill told me how he had married his former sister-in-law, long after the woman had split up with his wife's brother. Although they weren't blood relatives, the two women were like sisters, he said. In fact, they were so close that Bill's first wife had literally chosen his second wife.

Bill found that out when he and his new wife, Diane, were out to eat and ran into some work friends of his now-deceased wife. When Bill introduced Diane and they said, in effect, they already knew all about her, before she died, the first wife told them she hoped that if Bill ever remarried, she hoped it would be Diane. Talk about destiny.

Hope this dose of chicken soup was as heartwarming for you as it was for me.

Dave Varga is community editor of the Farmington Observer.

Edison finds favorable outlet for court decisions

There are two sides to every lawsuit, right?

Wrong, especially where the Michigan Supreme Court is concerned. I've commented in the past about our seven justices' writing fractured opinions in a case, and on Dec. 30 they did it again.

On the surface, the high court's procedure made sense: Consolidate appeals in three suits against Detroit Edison, our regional electric company. By the time they were done, however, they produced six opinions.

Bottom line: Be careful around power lines, because it's nearly impossible to prove Detroit Edison was negligent.

Case 1 was Gerald Groncki, a maintenance supervisor at a condominium complex in Novi. He was moving a 24-foot ladder that hit an unregulated overhead electrical line that had been in place six years. He went into cardiac arrest, lost a toe

and suffered personality changes.

Groncki sued. Edison won summary judgment before Oakland Circuit Judge Francis X. O'Brien. Northville attorney Sheila Thorp wrote the briefs for the high court and lost.

Case 2 was Theodore Parcher, who was moving a 29-foot-high scaffold on a forklift and hit a power line 35 feet above ground. He lost his right arm, right leg and left foot. Edison won summary judgment in Lapeer Circuit Court.

Case 3 was Wendell Bohnert, a delivery man for National Cement Products of Toledo for 40 years. At a home construction site in Monroe, the boom of his truck hit a 26-foot-high power line, and he died at the age of 58.

What do these cases mean to you? Not much, personally, except that you elected the seven justices, and you deserve an accounting of their stewardship.



TIM RICHARD

Chief Justice James Brickley (a Republican) wrote the "lead" opinion that decided the cases. The question, he said, was the scope of Edison's duty to move, insulate or de-energize overhead lines. "However, there is not duty to warn someone of a risk of which that person is aware," Brickley wrote.

"The costs of insulating or moving these lines would be significant. Edison alone has over 35,000 miles of power lines in this state. . . The social policy at issue is the public's need for

electric power at a reasonable cost." Opinion No. 1.

Justice Patricia Boyle (Democrat) "concurred only in the result," said the court reporter. Opinion No. 2.

Justice Conrad Mallett Jr. (now chief justice), joined by Michael Cavanaugh (both Democrats), agreed with Brickley on the Bohnert and Parcher cases, but dissented on the Groncki case. They would have sent the case back to Oakland Circuit Judge O'Brien "to assess the liability of the utility . . . concerning the proximity of the wire to the building and to the ground." They called Brickley's opinion "too narrow" and "inconsistent with basic principles of negligence law." Opinion No. 3.

Justices Dorothy Constock Riley (R) agreed in freeing Edison of liability in all three cases but dissented in the Bohnert case. She would have ruled in favor of the home builder, too, as a matter of law. Opinion No. 4.

Justice Elizabeth Weaver (R) agreed with Riley but wrote a separate dissent, saying Brickley's reasoning relied too heavily on a precedent in a General Motors case that resulted in "the unwarranted expansion of tort law. . . no matter how negligent the employee may be." Opinion No. 5.

Justice Charles Levin (liberal independent), who retired two days later, allegedly never saw deep pockets that shouldn't be dipped into. He dissented and wanted to rule against Edison on all three cases. Opinion No. 6.

Voters replaced Levin with Marilyn Kelley (D), who probably will be close to Cavanaugh. More of the same.

My advice to Chief Justice Mallett is to hire a management consultant who can get this array of individualists to work as a team. Six opinions from seven justices are an embarrassment to the state.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

MEAP results indicate improvement is needed

There was a fair amount of hand-wringing last week when the results of 1996's Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests were released showing a slight decline from previous years.

Math and reading tests were given last fall to fourth and seventh graders statewide. The Michigan Department of Education released the scores, which were printed for your school district in last week's edition of this newspaper.

Some findings and comments:

■ Statewide math results were down a bit more than reading. Maybe the fact that the test was given on Sept. 30, two weeks earlier than the mid-October date in previous years, meant that forgetting, lost two useful weeks for review.

■ Around 1,500 students from 33 charter schools took the MEAP tests for the first time. Overall, results for charter schools were worse than for public schools, with more charter school students earning low marks than satisfactory. Introducing competition into our K-12 school system may be a good idea, as charter advocates claim, but pretty soon charter schools are going to have to put up or shut up. If charter test results continue poorly, it might be a good idea to slow down the rush to charter all those schools now in the pipeline.

Interestingly enough, just a few days after the MEAP test results were released, Education Week, a respected trade newspaper, issued a report on the nation's schools which concluded that overall they were "riddled with excellence but rife with mediocrity." Staff spent a year assessing state school systems on 75 indicators such as academic standards, school climate, support for teachers and funding.

Michigan's report card was mixed.

We received a D for school climate, which includes things such as class size, student-teacher ratio and teacher views about violence in schools.

Quality of teaching, measured by the percentage of teachers who hold degrees in the subjects they teach and the number of newly graduated teachers from accredited colleges, drew a C.

Michigan rated a B-plus for adequacy of funding. (Michigan spends \$5,779 per student, less than the nation-leading New Jersey at \$8,118 but more than doormat Utah with \$3,637.)



PHILIP POWER

■ First, the best way to improve our public schools is to improve them, not destroy them as some pro-charter ideologues would have us do.

When it came to standards and assessments, however, Michigan rated an A-minus, based mainly on the fact that we measure pupil performance in math, English and science and hold districts accountable for results.

Wading through all this data is an excellent cure for insomnia. But the main points remain very clear:

First, the best way to improve our public schools is to improve them, not destroy them as some pro-charter ideologues would have us do.

Second, the best way to improve school performance is to set out clearly what we expect kids to learn and then assess what in fact they do learn. Publish the results, district by district and building by building. And then hold everybody — school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and kids — responsible for making improvements.

Third, the best thing for Gov. John Engler, the Michigan Legislature and the State Board of Education to do right now is adopt a tough, thorough, realistic, mandatory statewide curriculum for all schools. Caving in to the know-nothings and the local control freaks is no way to help our kids learn to compete in a tough world.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047 ext. 1880.

THE SPORTS AUTHORITY

OUR EVERYDAY LOW PRICES JUST GOT LOWER!

30% OFF

OUR EVERYDAY LOW PRICES

NOW 48.97 - 118.97

ORIG. 69.97 - 169.97

Mobius Ski Clothing

NOW 59.97 - 118.97

ORIG. 87.97 - 169.97

Below Zero Snowboard Clothing

NOW 139.97

ORIG. 199.99

ROSSIGNOL

YETI SKIS

NOW 219.97

ORIG. 279.99

ROCKWELL

NORROW AM SERIES SNOWBOARD

Styles shown are representative of selection and may vary by store.

Miller Road SALAMANCA (513) 738-5020	WATERFORD (513) 738-5020	UTICA (513) 754-6550
CLINTON TOWNSHIP (513) 781-8420	LIVONIA (513) 832-2750	DEARBORN (513) 533-0133
FLINT (513) 323-1110	TAYLOR (513) 374-0335	

STORE HOURS: MON-FRI 10AM-9:30PM SAT 9AM-9:30PM SUN 10AM-6PM

No skis at our Clinton Township, Dearborn, Taylor and Flint stores.