

## Opinions

### Everyone is entitled to them

Farmington High School parent Mark Mergener's thoughts, feelings and actions about teachers' reported behavior that he feels is less than admirable have sparked outrage by a number of students.

Their letters to the Observer appear in this issue. Like Mergener, the students are most certain their perspective and opinions are the correct ones, the only correct ones.

When reporter Tim Smith interviewed Mergener and composed a story about his opinions, there was no doubt that some in the school community would be upset. As a newspaper, our goal is to provide the public with as many and varied opinions as is humanly possible. Printing a story does not mean the newspaper or its staff agrees or disagrees with the person interviewed or with the subject. You may be guaranteed, however, that fairness and balance are the ground rules for this and all of our stories, whether our readers agree or disagree with what is written.

But this issue has continued long enough. We believe school district officials have addressed Mergener's concerns. Continuance will lead to further damaged reputations and, far worse, hurt feelings. Mergener has succeeded in raising everyone's consciousness.

Perhaps one lesson that can be learned is that when parents or taxpayers have a concern, the best course of action for a public body is to immediately respond. That not only cuts the losses, but prevents deeper antagonism and resentment on the part of the person bringing the complaints.

Letters from students who rightly support their teachers are printed in today's newspaper because we welcome their views, as well. But printing the letters also does not mean we agree or disagree with their opinions, however impassioned and certain of the truth are their words.

That's how a newspaper works. Our pages are to tell the world about what's going on in the Farmington area; what people, both the high-profile, and those who are not, think and do.

We believe Mergener has a right to express his opinions. And we believe that those who may disagree with him also have a right to express their opinions. The result may create a better environment in the schools and in the community because people are able to speak their minds freely and without fear of retribution.

## Do research or take a chance

Donating money to charities used to be easy. You drop some cash in a red kettle at Christmas; put a few bucks in a plastic jug in exchange for a Tootsie Roll; bag of peanuts or a plastic poppy at a stop light; or write out a check to one of the major charities. You figured the money was going to do some good for the cause it was intended.

It's not so easy anymore. The number of new charities is growing yearly, and more and more they're dialing you up on the phone or sending you fliers asking for your money. One group, the National Charities Information Bureau, points out that "cause-related marketing" in our nation has increased 504 percent in the past decade, with spending hitting \$630 million in 1999.

Giving your hard-earned dollars to a charity is a lot like spending money to purchase a stock, buy a major appliance or visit a pricey restaurant; it helps to conduct a bit of research to make sure you get your money's worth.

A recent story in the Livonia Observer outlined the surprising findings of a woman who wanted to give money to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, but felt like she was nearly duped by a sound-alike non-profit group. She decided to investigate and found out the charity that solicited her was something different than the better-known Make-A-Wish; it was called 'Children's Wish Foundation.'

The woman checked with the Michigan Attorney General's Office Charitable Trust Section which says the two groups are among more than 60 "wish-type" charities set up nationally to grant the wishes of terminally ill children. She also discovered that both charitable groups were among the many organizations that don't spend even most of their income on their announced goals.

In fact, many charities - including the Michigan branches of those two wish groups - spend more of their income soliciting donations than actually helping the less fortunate, according to the Attorney General's Office.

In defense of the Children's Wish Foundation, a representative points out that the

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tion.

Some of the letters, especially from students, believe we should not have aired Mergener's views at all. That's not only incredibly closed-minded, but it's downright unfair and scary.

Today's adults, many who went to school in the 1960s and 1970s, fought long and hard for the right to publish and distribute newspapers that covered issues - more often than not, contrary to the so-called establishment - in the schools.

Today is no different. Everyone has a right to their opinions. The fact that this newspaper or any other publication chooses to write about those opinions should be lauded, not condemned. Students who study government and democracy and the rights of a free society surely must understand that without varied views - some that may even demoralize and upset others - there is no freedom.

Students also would do well to remember that opinions are only opinions. Those in the right will remain unaffected by them. The strength of any institution will continue to be tested by controversy and varied opinions. Strong winds do not topple a strong house.

Mergener's concerns and the reaction to them should serve as an example of how democracy must work. Each of us is due our thoughts and opinions, and the right to voice them. Without that freedom, none of us can grow.

At the least, Mergener and his detractors have brought attention to behavior in a public setting. At the least, we will all probably become more cognizant of ourselves. That can't hurt.

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industry standard is that "you have to spend a dollar to earn a dollar."

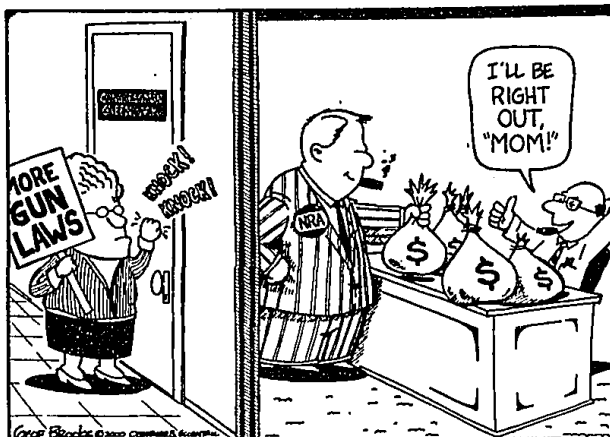
However, that isn't the standard the non-profit National Charities Information Bureau (NCIB) sets. The group supports "informed giving" and suggests spending at least 60 percent of income on programs. (The NCIB rates the national Make-A-Wish Foundation as "meets all standards," and the Children's Wish Foundation as "NCIB requests for information unanswered.")

At the Attorney General's Office, Charitable Trust Section Director Marion Gorton points out that the U.S. Supreme Court says they can't tell charities how much to spend on a cause - only that the group must file financial statements with the IRS.

Donors interested in finding out more about a charity are invited to call the Better Business Bureau, the Attorney General's Office or visit two Web sites that provide research on charities. The sites are [www.ncib.org](http://www.ncib.org), which rates charities as meeting their standards or not (with some shades in between), and [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org), which is called "the donor's guide to the charitable universe" and provides detailed financial reports on non-profit groups.

If you don't want to do the research, you can take your chances on your donation. Or, you could take the advice of Gorton of the Attorney General's Office: Just donate your money to local charity groups, since most of them are volunteer-oriented and spend no money on fund-raising, administration or employees. Hey, it's your money.

GEOFF BROOKS



Geoff Brooks is a cartoonist.

## LETTERS

*Opinions are to be shared: We welcome your ideas, that's why we offer this space for your opinions. We will help by editing for clarity. To assure authenticity we ask that you provide a contact telephone number and if mailing or faxing a letter, please sign it. Letters can be mailed to: Joanne Maliszewski, 33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335, faxed to Joanne at (734) 459-2700 or emailed to [jmaliszewski@ec.homecomm.net](mailto:jmaliszewski@ec.homecomm.net)*

### Speak up

We read with disbelief in the May 11 edition of the Detroit Free Press the article titled, "Shriners receive flak for their act - parade skit accused of pushing stereotypes."

Karen Bolen, co-chair of the Farmington/Farmington Hills Multicultural/Multiracial Community Council, "objects to what it says are unfair portrayals of Arabs as saber-wielding fanatics" and "objects to their mock cowboys and Indians shootout."

The Shriners do an outstanding job of performing in the parade. They are one of the reasons our family does not miss the parade. The motorcycle precision team is amazing and the miniature cars are hysterical. The man dressed as an Arabian knight, or Aladdin as our children call him (not a "saber-wielding fanatic" as Karen Bolen describes him), gives laughs to all. We all hope the cowboy and Indian show stops in front of us so we can see everything.

Karen Bolen says people have asked, "Why is this still going on? Aren't we passed that?" Past what, humor? Bigotry and racism should not be tolerated, but overall as a society we are losing the ability to laugh at ourselves. We are not thin-skinned, and we can judge for ourselves what is offensive. We do not need a watchdog group making our decisions on what is appropriate. We, and I believe the majority of citizens, take the Shriners' show for what it is - entertainment.

If the city loses the Shriners, they will be losing a big draw for the festival. The parade brings residents downtown, and in turn they stay a while longer to enjoy the rest of the festival.

I ask that the residents of Farmington/Farmington Hills call Mayor Bill Hartsock at city hall at 474-5500 and tell him we are in favor of the Shriners staying in the parade with all their units just the way they are.

If we do not voice our opinion, the Shriners will be quietly pushed out by a minority of people with a loud voice, without the majority of us speaking out.

Scott and Kathleen Thomas  
Farmington Hills

### Commit to journey

The mission of the Call to Action Coalition is to simply (1) further the expansion of drug and violence prevention initiatives and, (2) to create a more intolerant, yet caring attitude toward behaviors that threaten the health and safety of our children throughout the communities of Farmington/Farmington Hills.

Members of the coalition commit to become more educated on topics relating to drugs and violence, and to design and implement at least one project or program annually that addresses drug and violence prevention.

Farmington Families in Action, a lead organization within the coalition, devotes its entire mission to educating the community about the dangers of substance abuse.

Thus the coalition wishes to formally commend Farmington Families in Action and Farmington Public Schools for the GRIP conference, which was held on April 3 and 4 and featured Milton Creagh.

Milton's presentation was honest and powerful as he encouraged both parents and teens to become more accountable and responsible for breaking the cycle of denial and shame surrounding illegal drug use and addiction. Many have applauded the realism and the credibility of Milton's performances.

FFIA continues to preserve and commit to prevention education. This grass-roots organization survives on volunteerism and has already begun to plan October Month, 2000, one of the valuable projects designed by FFIA.

Volunteers are already needed to implement this worthwhile project. If you wish to volunteer or become involved with FFIA, contact Marie Stahl, co-president of FFIA at 476-6577.

Kudos to Farmington Families in Action. We are glad that you continue to "commit to the journey" to drive positive changes for our communities.

John Cotter, president, Call to Action  
Estralee Michaelson, executive director, Call to Action

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— Philip Power