

POINTS OF VIEW

Personal safety bears frail promise

Feeling safe is subjective. We feel safer in a car than a plane. But many more people are killed on the highways than in the air.

We feel safer at home than on the street. But more homicides occur among relatives than strangers.

We feel safer in our suburbs than the city. But while homicide percentages are going down in cities like Detroit and Pontiac, they are rising in our Oakland County suburbs.

The apparently random selection of Dr. Deborah Iverson as a robbery and murder victim invades our sense of feeling safe. Iverson, the 38-year-old ophthalmologist, wife and mother of two, was director of the Beaumont Hospital Eye Institute. Once she and husband Dr. Robert Iverson, director of critical care at Hutzel Hospital, had lived in the Palmer Woods section of Detroit before moving to Bloomfield Hills.

She was in one of our safe suburbs, Birmingham, when she was kid-

napped from a parking lot. Birmingham has campaigned long and hard to get shoppers to use its parking decks, perceived by some as less safe than the limited street parking. But, as Birmingham-Bloomfield Eccentric editor Joe Bauman points out, kidnapping Deborah Iverson would have been far riskier from any parking deck, all of which have toll booth attendants and limited egress. The seemingly safe surface parking lot, located between The Community House and Townsend Hotel and catty-corner from the Birmingham police station, has several exits and no attendant.

We feel safer during daylight hours. But Deborah Iverson was forced into her car on a sunny May 16th morning, persuaded to write two checks totaling \$1,300 and then to cash them. She was found the next day in Macomb County strangled in the back of her car, a photograph of her two young sons on top of her.



JUDITH DONER BERNE

Our sense of safety is further jolted by the resumes of the two young people who are jailed on charges of first-degree murder, first-degree murder while in the commission of a felony, and kidnapping. No city kids these, they grew up in middle-class homes and attended fine schools in our safe suburbs. Anitra Lynn Coomer, 21, attended Troy High School for two years before transferring to Lutheran High Northwest in Rochester. McConnell Adams Jr., 21, is a graduate of Rochester High School.

As parents of a 2-year-old child, you

might have hoped they would have stopped at robbery and let this mother of a 2- and 4-year-olds go home to them, if they are guilty of the crimes they are charged with. But after allegedly forcing her to come up with money to help pay off their debts, they apparently didn't feel safe. They were afraid she would identify them and so they are alleged to have killed her.

Robert Iverson says the Toyota Land Cruiser his wife was driving, selected because she thought it was the safest vehicle for her children, worked against her. First, it appears she was targeted because it was an expensive car. Police say Coomer and Adams parked their car next to Deborah Iverson's and waited for her to return. Second, the locks and latches that keep children secure may have blocked her chance for freedom. Robert Iverson hasn't felt safe since last May 16. He not only has had to cope with his wife's death, but he has always been a suspect. In fact, when

the police woke him early on New Year's Day to say they had a solid tip in the case, he thought they were coming to arrest him. Beyond that, he told a reporter, there were few safe people to turn to for support since police were investigating all their friends.

Yet, by all accounts, he endured the questions of police and the suspicions of others with dignity. "They were sensitive and somewhat apologetic but indicated the need to investigate," he said of the police. Of others, he said: "I can understand."

Feeling safe is subjective. The tragic death of this accomplished doctor, wife and mother forces us to substitute real facts for past notions.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric News Service. You can comment on this column by calling (313)953-2047, Ext. 1997 or by writing or faxing, (810)644-1314.

Suit may be bellwether against phone company

My colleagues, my mayor, the state and the courts are beating up on Ameritech, the Chicago-based telephone company.

For decades, southeastern Michigan was in one area code, 313. In 1994, Ameritech split about half the area into the 810 code. Next year, both codes will be split again, and we'll have four codes: 313, 734, 248 and 810. A thinking company would have split the codes along city or county lines. Not Ameritech. The new 248 area code will cover 95 percent of Oakland County but also pick up elvers and chunks of five other counties.

It's dumb. My own wrath has a different source. More codes are needed because customers are being conked into doing many more things by telephone. We have kids' phones, pagers, car phones, computers and that greatest of evils, voicemail.

We dial more and more calls but

complete fewer and fewer. In the olden times of the 1980s, if you couldn't get through to someone you'd get a busy signal, or a receptionist would take a message and tell you if your friend was out of the country or just out to lunch.

With voice mail, you get a costly game called "telephone tag." I thought it was bad when it took me seven calls to reach a lawyer about a court decision. Then a radio colleague said he exchanged 24 calls, by actual count, before he could complete one interview.

Ameritech made money on his 23 unsuccessful calls.

Look at your own Ameritech bill and count the number of nearby toll calls that lasted one minute or less. Those are probably incomplete, where you reached only an answering machine, a pager or a computer that wouldn't let you inside. In December, 47 percent of my calls went to voice



TIM RICHARD

mail or an unresponsive computer. Ameritech made money on 100 percent of them.

Ameritech has a scam few customers understand. When you make a credit card call, Ameritech imposes a surcharge of 65 cents — even if you call from the drug store booth a mile from home.

The state Public Service Commission regulates the surcharge under the Michigan Telecommunications Act (MTA), a law largely written by Ameritech's lob-

byists. Without PSC authorization, Ameritech offered a promotional discount — 65 cents for a local credit card call. (Some deal!)

So PSC in 1995 fined Ameritech \$62,000 and issued a cease-and-desist order. Ameritech appealed, but the state Court of Appeals upheld the fine on a 3-0 vote. (Case 18728, decided Dec. 3, 1996.)

In a 1996 amendment to the MTA that few legislators understood when they voted on it, Michigan tried to bring competition to the phone business by letting local and long-distance companies enter each other's markets.

Ameritech has fought the entry of other companies, however, by asking PSC to delay "dialing parity" (so you wouldn't have to dial 10-288 to have a nearby long-distance call billed to competitor AT&T). PSC not only turned down Ameritech but ordered it to pay a 55 percent discount on carrier access charges if it failed to implement

dialing parity on schedule (action of Oct. 7).

An "outraged" Attorney General Frank Kelley accused Ameritech of "rubbing salt into the wounds of its competition" by making people dial the extra five digits, then advertising how easy its own access is. He's intervening in a suit against Ameritech.

Ameritech's attempt to get into the long-distance trough is being resisted by AT&T and MCI. They say Ameritech doesn't have real local competition.

AT&T and MCI accuse Ameritech of "stonewalling" the PSC by challenging its authority in federal court, which tossed out Ameritech's suit, according to the plaintiffs' newsletter of November.

Try to find that in your Ameritech bill.

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

Look beyond glitter for growth

First thing I did after returning from a family vacation to Grand Cayman Island was — surprise! — look through the newspapers to see what I had missed while away.

Not much, it turns out, except for a lot of fairly self-congratulatory stuff in the Detroit papers about how Detroit is on the way back by becoming an entertainment and gambling destination, thanks to the new stadiums for the Lions and Tigers and the passage of the ballot proposal authorizing casino gambling.

One article gushed about how Detroit, with the upgraded Metropolitan Airport as a major gateway to the Far East, could become a Mecca for wealthy Asian gamblers. Detroit casino task force chair Jim Nicholson was quoted to the effect that Asians "love to gamble, and they gamble big... You want to compete for them."

Another raised questions about how the state's new Gaming Control Board, appointed on Dec. 20 by Gov. John Engler, could possibly set up rules for licensing and fair play within the 60 days allowed by the ballot proposal. The initiative also limits the fee the state may charge casinos to only \$60,000 for a licensing investigation, a process that has cost other states in excess of \$100,000.

Certainly, it's essential to figure out how to keep to a minimum the organized (and not so organized) criminals who tend to flock to the endless streams of cash that come with casino gambling operations.

But my experience on Grand Cayman sensitized me to an equally serious, though more distant, problem: The seductive and destructive qualities of very great success run riot.

If people who have been going to Cayman for years are to be believed, the island was a paradise 20 years ago: a wonderful beach; seven miles of pink sand; great weather; beautiful, clear seas; an old city, Georgetown, with fine old buildings; no taxes — literally none; a laid-back style of living.

Not surprisingly, all this attracted a lot of tourists. Big hotel chains — Holiday Inn, Hyatt, Westin — built enormous structures along Seven Mile Beach. Developers began to tout the virtues of buying/building/investing in Cayman — which drove up enormously the price of land.

Lastly, the cruise ship industry discovered Cayman. While we were there, three new great



PHILIP POWER

white ships moored each day in the Georgetown harbor, disgorging 6,000 people onto an island with less than 30,000 total population.

Predictable result: Congestion. High prices. Infestation of trinket-guzzling tourists, not in the least interested in the qualities that made Cayman attractive in the first place.

Long term outlook: Grim. My distinct impression is that Cayman is in grave danger of being overwhelmed — ruined? — by its own success, thereby losing its own special soul. Atlantic City and Miami Beach come quickly to mind as cautionary examples.

Now what does this have to do with gambling in Detroit?

Just this: No city, no economy, no agriculture, no tourist destination can long survive if it does not maintain a sense of balance, of diversity, of recognition of the factors that made it desirable in the first place. A city whose foundation is based on gambling and professional sports stadiums is a city with no solid base.

Certainly Detroit is by no means out of the woods. And I hope, like many others, that new stadiums and gambling casinos will help. But what will eventually secure the future of the city is not only the glittering promise of get-rich-quick gambling, but the ways this stimulates the balanced development of the city in such a way as to attract industry, jobs, young people with children.

Based on what I saw in Cayman, relying solely on the glitter of gambling isn't the right way to do it.

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

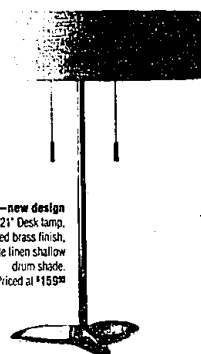
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