

POINTS OF VIEW

The Grumpies branch out

Members of the Grumpies are taking their nicely grumpy ways into new arenas.

In case you don't remember, the Grumpies are a group of inveterate letter to the editor writers who believe that taking pen in hand on current issues will make the world better for future generations. They are shepherded by Tony Brehler, a soft-spoken but tenacious retired office manager and World War II veteran from Livonia.

When I first met them in January of 1994, they were a small band of mostly retired men who got together monthly at the old Bob Evans restaurant in Southfield. Around a couple of tables, they noted whose letters had appeared in various newspapers and engaged in a lively discussion on issues of the day.

Three years ago, I encountered them at a different meeting place — the Bloomfield Township Library. They had added a woman, Patti Alapach of Farmington Hills, and a couple of younger men, but were reeling from the deaths of two of the original Grumpies.

They found new life, I discovered on visiting them earlier this month at their newest meeting place — the Carl Sandburg Branch of the Livonia Public Library. It seemed appropriate. It was Sandburg who wrote: "I am the people — the mob — the crowd — the mass. Do you know that all the great work of the world is done through me?"

Although the meeting was called for 9:30 a.m., they began gathering a half hour earlier. Brehler prepared for the session by placing on the table a plaster statue of Walt Disney's grumpiest dwarf and an American flag.

The Grumpies now number 19 — Roy Trevisan of Farmington joined in December, Steve Sutton, also of Farmington, in February. That number also includes three associate members who can't regularly attend meetings.

They have further diversified — with five females including an 11-year-old, Carrie Dubin of Farmington Hills, who attends meetings during school vacations with her dad, Ray Dubin, among the letter-writing crew.

And all but two Grumpies are online. (Yes, two are identified by the Grumpy moniker in their e-mail addresses: grrrumpie is Tom Hunter of Bloomfield Township's screen name; grumpyneil is Neil Goodbred's of Livonia.)

Despite their increasing size, it's easier than ever to put names and faces together. That's thanks to Hank Borgman from Farmington, who supplements the list of names and addresses with computer-printed color photos of each member thanks to his state-of-the-art digital camera.

Almost every month, the Grumpies host special guests including various state representatives, newspaper editors, and suburban mayors such as Jack Kirksey of Livonia and Aldo



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Vagnozzi of Farmington Hills.

This day was no exception. Jill Streit from the Livonia Public Schools wants to bring the Grumpies into classrooms to teach letters- and persuasive-writing skills. "I think they (students) would be very intrigued with you," Streit tells them.

It seems a perfect outgrowth of both their concerns for future generations and their lucid, succinct prose. Who better to teach young people than those who actively pursue a better world? Who better to teach young people than those who collectively had 252 letters published in Detroit-area newspapers during 1998?

The Grumpies stalk the letters to the editor pages for their own and others' well-reasoned missives. That's how newest member Sutton was recruited. "It was Hank (Borgman) who spotted a letter written by Steve," Brehler says. "He suggested that Steve could make a great Grumpy."

"I've been looking for a group like this for years," Sutton told me part way through his first meeting. "I like it that not everyone agrees with all my views. You don't grow with that."

The Grumpies are pretty full, since they're limited by the number of people their meeting room holds. But, if you regularly write letters to the editor and enjoy hot discussion on current issues, give Brehler a call at (248) 477-3816.

Grumpical possible scenarios: He'll put you on the waiting list or suggest a spin-off — Grumpies II.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is a former managing editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. You can comment on this column by calling (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1997, in a letter, or fax (248) 477-9722 to the editor of this newspaper.

Benefits haven't appeared

I've been telling you so.

Despite the glossy promises Mackinac Center and Gov. John Engler made about charter schools, the benefits haven't appeared. To borrow the governor's campaign slogan: "Promises made, promises broken."

The notion of charter schools, as developed by the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast in 1988, was to liberate good teachers and free them from the rigid dogmas of school boards and educationists. There would be innovations in curriculum, more parental choice, improved learning for motivated students. Rah, rah, rah.

Two scholarly reports on Public School Academies, commissioned by the Legislature, tell us that PSAs, or "charter schools," have fallen short, for the most part. Again, I remind you that not all charter schools are bad; about one-fourth have better MEAP test scores than the traditional public schools in the surrounding community.

But failures exceed successes. Engler was cheered twice in his State of the State address when he agreed with President Clinton that "all states and school districts must turn around their worst performing schools — or shut them down." An honest governor would start shutting down many of the 137 incompetently run, unimaginative, low-performing, low-paying charter schools.

Public Sector Consultants Inc. (PSC) of Lansing and Western Michigan University reported back Feb. 18 on the first four years of the charter experiment. PSC's report made a lot of excuses for the poor performance — they had to struggle to survive — but the partners showed through in both reports:

■ **Test scores** — "The percentage of students scoring 'satisfactory' at charter schools is lower than at a majority of local traditional public schools," said PSC. It could have bought this newspaper and saved the state \$149,999.50.

■ **When public schools had declining test scores, their enemies shouted this over the airwaves. But when charter schools (as a group) flop, their alibi is that they are just too new and somehow attracted the bottom of the public schools' academic barrel.**

■ **Parental involvement** — "Parents had — or exercised — less influence over (charter) schools in the upper grades, and communication with the home was perceived to decline in the upper grades," said WMU. So much for the big fit of "parental choice."

■ **Curriculum** — Michigan got cheated. Instead of getting charter schools that specialize in science or the performing arts,



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"there are limited innovations being developed and applied in the PSAs," said WMU. Many charter schools hire business management firms and revert to "canned curriculums."

■ **Dropouts** — "On the whole, the PSAs had higher dropout rates than did their host communities." In short, PSAs dumped the problems back into the traditional public schools.

■ **Personnel management** — WMU found "extensive nepotism in employment of relatives" and "high rates of attrition among teachers, students and even principals," said WMU.

■ **Organization** — Instead of motivated teachers and concerned parents starting charter schools, the biggest group of applicants came from the ranks of private schools, with only a "handful" from public schools.

■ **Church and state** — Charter schools are supposed to be like public schools, with no "established" religion. Yet PSC noted that ministers often were among organizers, and WMU quoted students as saying "this is a Christian school," though leaders denied any proselytizing. Many of us still suspect charter schools are a subterfuge for fundamentalist parochialism.

■ **Minorities** — "Thus there is support for those who argue that the charter schools are skimming and increasing segregation ... there is a clear trend toward fewer and fewer minorities in the PSAs," WMU said.

■ **Finances** — Charter schools mean that they don't have capital and startup costs. Yet they get the same \$5,600 per pupil as do public schools, but they often don't offer expensive high school courses, school lunches, transportation, special education, enabling them to turn a \$1,000-per-pupil profit.

Engler should keep his promise and shut down the bad ones.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events. His voice mail number is (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1881.

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