

## On the subject of...

## By their fruits

By Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

# The Aberdeen Advocate

If you blog along with us on our website, you probably already know that I'm in the process of writing a book about my adventures in politics—Aberdeen, Mississippi, style. The title is *Assurdia on Absurdia*. (Unless, of course, I change my mind which I do frequently, having learned from Bobby Ferguson that such is my prerogative.)

*Absurdia* tells the tale of a Montana gal who falls in love with a handsome barber and a beautiful little Southern town. The book chronicles her awakening to the horrific graft and corruption which lies just below the surface of the pretty little town's façade. Essentially, *Absurdia* is a collection of the many stories I've written for you over the past four years.

I bring the book up only because tomorrow you folks may be writing the final chapter.

If you blog with us or read this publication regularly, you also know that I'm just a couple of months away from taking down *The Advocate's* shingle. When I ran for alderman four years ago, I promised you that I would serve you faithfully and even though you chose not to elect me, I took and still take that promise seriously. I have worked tirelessly—okay—tirelessly isn't the right word. I've gotten very, very tired over time. Nevertheless, I have done my best to make your lives better. I hope I've not been wasting my time....the election results will tell it all.

Today, with tomorrow's municipal primary election looming large, I want to remind you of some things we've discovered together.

Aldermen Willie Cook and Alonzo Sykes have written off countless public utility bills for voters in their wards in return for votes. This matter is still under investigation by the office of the State Auditor. In due time, justice will be brought to bear and I would not be surprised to see

some folks indicted on any number of charges. Prison time may be in the offing for some city employees, starting at the top and going all the way down.

Wee Willie, of course, is no longer a real threat to the city, although we will be paying off lawsuits because of his shenanigans for a long time to come.

But, please reader friends—when you go to the polls tomorrow, bear in mind that Alonzo Sykes is hoping you will re-elect him. I've learned that many voters over in Ward 1 have asked other candidates for that seat if they can count on them to "hold our light bills like Reverend Sykes do."

Because the candidates I've spoken with about this matter have integrity and are not drunk with power, they have answered "No" to that question. In a perfect world such an answer would win an election, but Aberdeen isn't perfect.

I have a heavy heart, but I must confess I believe Sykes may win his race. However, I expect his stay at City Hall will be truncated in one way or another. If he doesn't go to jail for his part in the Electric Department scandal, maybe he will move into that house he wants over on Locust Street. If he moves out of his ward, I'll waste no time calling for his immediate replacement and, because we have finally been successful in causing the residency requirements for city officials to be enforced, Sykes will be history in a heartbeat.

I must also remind you that Cloyd Garth, possibly the most sinister of all the "leaders" we have mistakenly elected, has been singularly successful in disrupting our police force—making it a sham. Because of his abominable behavior, and the sanctioning of such behavior by the other two black aldermen, officers of the law in Aberdeen

are afraid to do their jobs. Is this the way you want it to be Aberdeen?

I would also point to Garth's part in bleeding off city funds for his part in the Save Our Children fiasco. If you will recall, Garth said he used city money to pay for printing and distribution costs for the event. But then, he used the city's copy machines to make the flyers and paid his son to deliver them door to door. (Can you spell double-dipping?)

Despite our many requests for an accounting of exactly how the "tourism grant" was spent and how the "tourism grant" managed to bring people to Aberdeen, we have never seen a report nor an evaluation of the effectiveness of the event itself.

We also know that Cloyd Garth is in the habit of using city equipment and facilities for other unofficial purposes. For example, Garth, who appears to have no real job, does occasionally do recruiting work. As we understand it, his "business" is putting young athletes who demonstrate some talent together with college coaches in the hope of winning some kind of "signing" bonus for himself. To that end, he has been known to use the Parks and Rec gymnasium for his own private gain.

All of those illegal and shifty behaviors aside, though, we have a bigger problem with the incumbents. I challenge you to find one thing they have done in the past four years to make Aberdeen a better place.

Really. Name just one. Think hard.

The animal shelter? It was built *in spite* of the aldermen by a group of committed volunteers and was grudgingly

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# Issues and Answers

## (Otherwise known as the Ed Rayfield Show)

This week's question: **The current administration has been plagued by a string of lawsuits arising from the Board of Aldermen's failure to follow proper hiring and/or termination procedures. In your administration, how will you approach the daunting task of hiring and keeping good personnel?**

**Ed Rayfield—Candidate for Alderman, Ward 2:**

Within the hiring process are several potential trouble spots that could conceivably lead to litigation. Following are some suggestions which would guide us safely through the process:

1. Make sure you have a job description which accurately describes the position,

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including essential and nonessential functions.

2. Do at least a minimal investigation, verify information on the resume and application, and check references.

3. Ask the applicant to sign a written consent form to check references.

4. To the extent possible, ask only questions which are job related in the interview. Interviewers cannot ask about marital status, age, children or whether a woman intends to become pregnant.

5. Keep in mind that the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 permits employers to ask the applicant to describe or demonstrate whether he or she could perform the essential functions of the job.

6. Take accurate records and notes of the hiring process.

7. Make sure the letter offering employment is accurate and specific, especially with respect to any employment-at-will policy (meaning no particular reason to dismiss someone) or other conditions of employment (medical exam, background check, and so forth).

8. Be prepared to explain to unsuccessful candidates why they were not hired should they ask. While there is no legal requirement to do so, it is just good business practice and may keep the candidate from having the impression that there was an unlawful, discriminatory reason for not hiring him or her.

Similar to the hiring process, termination is another potential trouble spot for litigation. Following are some guidelines to keep in mind to help us stay clear of lawsuits:

1. Document reasons for discharge—at the time of termination as well as on prior occasions such as reviews, warnings and so forth. This is the single most important deterrent to wrongful termination suits.

2. Even after a decision has been made, carefully review the reasons behind the termination to make sure they are not discriminatory. Further, do not violate public policy (that is, court decisions, codes of ethics and so forth; for example, an employee may not be fired for taking sick leave or for taking workers' compensation).

3. Understand even if there is an employment-at-will policy, an employee may not be dismissed for an unlawful reason (such as discrimination of any kind).

4. Be prepared to explain to the person why he or she is being dismissed. Again, this is usually not a legal requirement, but it is a tremendous mistake not to do so as failure to explain could encourage litigation.

5. Respect terminated employees' dignity and treat them with respect.

If elected, I will work very hard with the other aldermen and the department heads to be certain that good, consistent policies and procedures for hiring and for termination are followed in order to avoid lawsuits. And, as in any business, the key to our success is working together.

## Which of these men can lead us to a place called "Happily Ever After?"

- Mavor**
- Cecil Belle (Incumbent)
  - Jim Ballard
  - Steve Lance

- Ward 1**
- Alonzo Sykes (Incumbent)
  - Robert Devaull
  - Donald Dahlem

- Ward 3**
- Roger Cooperwood
  - David Ewing
  - Jarrod Jones
  - Dwight Stevens

- Ward 5**
- John Allen
  - Henry Calvert
  - Tony Rogers

- Chief of Police**
- Walter Sykes (Incumbent)
  - Henry Randle
  - Quinell Shumpert

- Ward 2**
- Cloyd Garth Sr.
  - Ed Rayfield
  - Wilchie Clay
  - Curly Payne

- Ward 4**
- Brunson Odom (Incumbent)
  - Randy Nichols
  - Bug Jackson



# You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him gather moss...

By Viki Eggers Mason (mostly)

I must confess to you, reader friends, that as the election approaches I find myself fretting over whether or not I have done every last thing in my puny earthly power to make you understand how critical your vote is on Tuesday. I am sick with fear that you will be so disenchanted with Aberdeen's sad situation or so very lazy that you will fail to remember that YOU hold the key to progress and prosperity for our precious little town.

I roamed around the worldwide web for a considerable time in search of stories about how one vote changed the world and eventually found several which seemed particularly well written. I even put some of the material into this space and sent it off to Rowe for review. He brought it back to me just last Thursday morning with a stack of paperwork demonstrating that the stories were not altogether factual. So, that evening, I found myself back at square one.

Inspiration comes from unusual places sometimes. This time, it came from a very ordinary, very untrendy place: The Presidential Prayer Team. (<http://praythevote.org>)

According to their website, The Presidential Prayer Team was born out of the attacks of 9/11 and has harnessed the power of the internet to

create a powerful ministry. Members are admonished to pray for our elected leaders from the holder of the Oval Office and his/her cabinet members, to Congress and every other public servants, including members of our military forces. These prayers are lifted up in order that God might guide these people in their day-to-day activities and, in so doing, keep our nation safer. Biblical principles also urge us to pray that God will raise up men and women to leadership roles and that those leaders will honor Him.

As Christians, we are charged by God Almighty to select leaders who strive to lead us in the American tradition according to the values embraced by our founding fathers. Those traditional values include honesty, integrity, courage, faith and charity.

I would submit that, while two of the leaders who are currently seated around our local board table may hold themselves up as Ministers of the Gospel, their actions fall far short of the values they seem to preach. These men claim to be peach trees, but they keep dropping lemons. We must pray for the discernment to "know them by their fruit" and to vote accordingly. If we fail to do so, will surely reap an unhappy harvest as has been the case in Aberdeen for these four years past.

Noah Webster, one of the aforementioned founding fathers, said, "When you become entitled to exercise the right of voting for public office, let it be impressed upon your mind that God *commands* you to choose for your rulers just men who will rule in fear of God. The preservation of government relies upon the faithful discharge of this duty."

And so, I send you to the polling places, reader friends. Please, please be prayerful as you go. Please know that Aberdeen's future truly depends upon your one, little vote. As for me, I'll attempt to remember that I've tried my best to lead you to water. Whether or not you gather moss is entirely up to you.

***"Let each citizen remember at the moment he is offering his vote that he is not making a present or a compliment to please an individual, but that he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society for which he is accountable to God and his country."***

*...Samuel Adams*

## By their fruits...

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thrown a few bones only because the aldermen couldn't find a way to slither out from under the public's attentive gaze.

Ok, lets think of something else they did right. They passed a law that makes it illegal for Dad to check the oil in daughter's car when she comes home for a visit. Nah. Not good.

They passed a smoking ban that violates the constitutionally protected property rights of business owners—but we are much safer now that Fred's cannot sell ashtrays. (Yes, it's true. Having ashtrays in any business for any purpose is a violation of the statute.)

Ok, here we go. They hired more black people. Actually, with one or two exceptions, they hired ONLY black people. It should also be pointed out that they also retained many employees for no good reason. Remember the electric department employee who kited something like \$67 THOUSAND DOLLARS worth of checks? She's still with us. Do your remember the hiring of Sharon Edmond as municipal court clerk even though she can't seem to create a system

for keeping critical paperwork from dematerializing, all of which causes criminals to remain at large for longer periods of time.

These are the same leaders who have staunchly defended Municipal Court Jester Adrian Haynes in spite of her outrageous behavior in and outside of the Courtroom. These men leave the city of Aberdeen wide open for serious litigation because, in their ignorance and arrogance, they deny the citizens due process each and every week. These lawsuits will come and trust me when I tell you, it won't be pretty.

Let's just think about lawsuits for a moment. Two lawsuits in the matter of the wrongful hiring of Sharon Edmond. Four lawsuits concerning the firing of police officers (the two who arrested Cloyd and Lady B. Garth, and two who were fired because they observed Wee Willie Cook playing patty-cake with one of his several lady friends).

There are other suits in the mix, including one brought by a woman who said she was

overlooked for a job because she was entirely too white. Bear in mind that each lawsuit filed costs the taxpayers a \$5,000 deductible. Ouch.

You will go to the polls tomorrow. When you do, please remember this little laundry list. If you want change, then you have to vote for change. If you don't vote for change, you'll get exactly what you deserve—more of the same old stuff.

After spending the past four years writing the book, I'd like to think the ending will be a happy one. Maybe we won't fix everything this time around, but every little bit helps. So, as you prepare to cast your ballot on Tuesday, please vote as if your future and the future of your children depended upon the decisions you make. Because, guess what? It really does!



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