

On the subject of...

The Service Department

By Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

One of the benefits of getting older is the perspective which comes with an ever-growing collection of memories. Living a life is like scaling a mighty mountain. You start at the bottom with vision enough to understand that you have nowhere to go but up, then, years later after you've struggled and suffered long enough, you are given the miraculous gift of hindsight. It all becomes perfectly clear.

As it works out, a few days back I had the opportunity to have a long conversation with a remarkable young man whom I hold in great esteem. He is a successful businessman who is fast becoming a leader in his industry. He has a lovely family, a nice home and drives a truck for which he paid more money than I've spent on entire four-bedroom homes. To me, it looks like he's climbed his mountain and planted his flag. To him, it looks different.

I have several theories about the human male. Men may achieve their full physical

growth in their early 20s, but I don't think they actually grow up until they reach 35. Until then, they are just oversized boys who want to race around in fast, shiny vehicles, conquer as many females as possible and best each other whenever the opportunity arises in competitions of all sorts including marathon belching and the making of other bodily noises not generally acceptable in polite society. This sudden-onset maturity happens at precisely the same moment they realize that they ARE mortal after all and, to complicate matters, their lives are half over. (No wonder they want to run out and buy little red sports cars. Talk about trauma!) I suspect my young friend is in the throes of mid-life crisis.

Of course, women are not exempt from the mid-life crisis. Mine struck me in my early 40s. It was at that point when I realized I'd spent nearly a quarter of a century engaged the ultimate exercise in futility. I had stubbornly been trying to make a really

nice friendship into an endlessly romantic marriage. It simply wasn't working. Moreover, the reasons for my obstinate tenacity to the failed marriage (my two sons) were, at last, grown and capable of surviving on their own. One morning I woke up and decided to live my life in selfish dedication to my own sweet self. I identified my two least helpful habits, my marriage and cigarette smoking and gave them both up on the same day. I tell folks I still miss cigarettes. It's true. (My ex doesn't let me miss him...he stays in touch as do my other dear friends.)

As an interesting aside and a testament to God's eternal sense of humor, just about two weeks after the break, my mother suffered a heart attack and came to live with me—so much for selfish indulgences.

Somebody once told me that if you were stuck on a desert island you would surely go crazy. You would

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The best laid plans of mice and men

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

Early last week, I had the outline of what was to be this week's column all but completed. But, as it often happens, "the best laid plans of mice and men" frequently go awry.

That's what occurred in my case, anyway, because Tuesday evening, an anonymous caller took me to task for what she considered to be a disparaging article I wrote last week concerning the so-called "stellar career" of Aberdeen school Superintendent Lavon Fluker-

Reed.

In essence, the caller claimed I had offered no concrete examples to prove Reed's career here was anything but "stellar." She went on to say my entire story centered around the various levels assigned to each of the district's school's and she correctly pointed out that under Reed's direction no school in Aberdeen had ever been assigned a Level 1 (the worst).

My reply to her was that space (or lack thereof) prevented me from expounding on the many failures (or "regrets," as Reed so succinctly put it) which took place during her tenure as school superintendent and that, if need be, I could cite enough instances that it would take several weeks worth of Advocate columns to adequately cover them all.

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eventually lose your sanity not because of your own problems, but for the absence of other people's problems against which you can measure your own.

Somehow, when we lose ourselves in the study of our own miserable circumstances, we begin to collapse upon ourselves – we implode. If we spend too much time wallowing in our own failures (or second-guessing our successes), we become emotionally ingrown – and as it is with toenails or hairs, we eventually fester up. Toenails, hairs and people are meant to grow outward. So, then, the obvious solution is to focus outside ourselves.

In the course of my visit with my young friend, I took the opportunity to wax philosophical on the subject of service to mankind. Looking backward, it is easy for me to identify the times in my life when I was the happiest. My most productive years have been those spent in service to others. My work in the field of motherhood was my best and most challenging task – it remains my favorite job. My other favorite jobs were those that challenged me to fix broken houses, broken economies and, most recently, broken governments. I'm happiest when I'm building something that will outlast me. I think that's true of most other humans. Sadly, however, we live in a society that forgets to teach us the importance of serving others.

I suggested to my troubled buddy that he make time to volunteer for some small civic chore. Go to the hospital and read to sick children. Visit a nursing home and play a game of chess with a lonely old man. Spend an hour a week at the local food bank. Start writing a little newspaper designed to pull a sad community out of a dangerous rut and into the realm of exciting possibilities! Naturally, he made all the predictable excuses. He claimed to have no time, much work and many other responsibilities. He was just too busy. I yawned and rolled my eyes.

Everybody is busy. We all have responsibilities. But sometimes we are busy doing nothing of any value whatsoever. How often do we waste a perfectly glorious afternoon complaining to our co-workers about the boss. How many eve-

nings a week do we spend staring at the tube and bemoaning the state of civilization. These exercises accomplish nothing and, worse, serve only to perpetuate our misery. These emotional aerobics somehow validate our victimhood and make us deserving of the nervous breakdown we think is inevitable given the depth of our despair.

Oh, my aching elbow!

Like it or not, God in His wisdom made us dependent upon one another. He made each of us with the capacity to build, grow and change things. When we are not about the business of helping our neighbors, we feel a sad, aching, empty place inside and it does not go away of its own free will. We have to fill the void through service of some small kind. It's in our genes and it is a hunger born in each of our children. If we don't fill our own void, then we do not teach our children how to fill theirs. Generations of unhappy, unfulfilled humans tell the story and that story is written in penitentiaries and back-street drug deals all across this country. Service to your fellow man is part of the deal and you've got to do it or die trying.

All of which brings me to the point of this week's rant. In a few months, we will be electing new community leaders – that is, of course, if we are able to find a few stand-up citizens willing to fulfill their civic duty in such a way. As I speak to folks these days looking for a few good men and women who will stand for election and make the commitment to actually LEAD us somewhere, I hear a lot of excuses.

"I'm too busy already."

"I don't need any more headaches."

"What? They couldn't PAY me enough to do that thankless job."

We have but a few months to start the engines of change and launch ourselves into forward motion. At this writing, I know of only two sterling citizens who have announced their willingness to take on Aberdeen's problems, turn us around and lead us back toward a healthy economy based on sound busi-

ness and ethical principles. They are David Ewing, Jr. (Ward 3) and Randy Nichols (Ward 5). It would appear that everyone else thinks Cloyd Garth, Alonzo Sykes, Willie Cook, Brunson Odom, Jim Buffington, Cecil Belle and Walter Sykes have done their jobs well enough to earn re-election. Say it aint so, Aberdeen!

I've spent the past three years turning over rocks for you – letting you see for yourselves what slithers out. I've spent countless hours showing you where the rats reside. You'll not convince me that you weren't listening! I know you're out there and I know you're unsure of yourselves – it looks like a monumental task because, guess what, it is. Nevertheless, allow me to give you this small assurance:

There is a huge brain-trust in Aberdeen. You are surrounded by bright, dedicated people who, once recruited to your team, will help you toward the goal. You have all the elements for success at your disposal. All Aberdeen needs are a few leaders with a common positive vision who are also blessed with unsinkable souls. Come on down, neighbor. As long as you will work for the good of the community, you'll have my support every step of the way!

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369-7705

Ward 2-Alderman Cloyd Garth

369-5734

Ward 3-Taxed but not represented

Ward 4-Alderman Brunson Odom

369-2246

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The best laid plans of mice and men

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She also asked if Reed was so incompetent, why was she appointed to the state school board and my reply was that Democratic Governor Ronnie Musgrove made that ill-advised political appointment in an election year in which he pandered to the black and women voters of the area in a failed attempt to be re-elected. Too, it's my understanding that particular seat on the board was reserved for an education administrator (Reed replaced the superintendent of the Jackson public schools who had retired and the two were reportedly "colleagues.")

However, the caller was correct in her assertion in one respect (that no concrete examples were presented), so I will utilize this space to document, as Paul Harvey is fond of saying, "the rest of the story." At the conclusion of this article, hopefully the caller will agree that Reed's dozen-plus years as superintendent were not, in any way, what one could describe as "stellar."

There were tell-tale signs that Reed wasn't up to the task early on, but the first "concrete evidence" of that fact was when she refused to pay a football officiating crew who had called a B-team football game here in Aberdeen. Reed was ticked at her head football coach and athletic director because he had failed to notify her that the game had been switched from Houston to Aberdeen, so she took the position the game had never been played and therefore, the referees would not be entitled to their game fees.

After several weeks of wrangling, the Mississippi High School Activities Association informed Reed that if she continued to refuse payment, the MHSAA would not assign any referees to officiate any Aberdeen game (varsity or B-team) which, in effect, would result in game forfeitures and possibly probation.

Now, any competent administrator would have realized the folly in refusing to pay the officials and would have never put his or her sports program in the crosshairs of the MHSAAA, so it's difficult to understand why Reed didn't just pay the referees following the game and then keep this entire fiasco in-house. (Too, there's something fundamentally wrong when a superintendent with absolutely no experience running an athletic

department tells an experienced coach/AD he doesn't have the authority to move a B-team football game.)

Other incidents in which Reed's inability to run the school system in a professional manner began to surface over the next several years, including what could only be described as a public relations disaster in the so-called "hiring" of Dr. Jackie Wofford as principal at the high school. To refresh the readers' memories, Jennifer Wilson, a highly competent and very professional administrator who was the principal at Prairie, had originally agreed to move to the high school to replace Dwight McComb. After a few days, she changed her mind and requested her old job back. Reed agreed to let her return to Prairie and then offered the job to Dr. Wofford, who was the principal at the Middle School.

Wofford wanted time to mull the offer over, so he informed Reed he would give her his answer after returning from an out-of-town trip. While away, Wofford decided against making the switch and, after failing to make contact with Reed via telephone, he declined the offer in a message on her answering machine. (According to my sources, one of the sticking points with both Wilson and Wofford was the fact that neither one wanted Teresa Price retained as assistant principal at the high school. Ironically enough, Reed later hired Price as the principal, but that's a story for another day.)

Upon his return to Aberdeen, Wofford was amazed to read in the *Aberdeen Examiner* that he had been named the new principal at Aberdeen High School despite the fact he had declined the position switch. He was even more shocked when Reed reportedly informed him he would, in so many words, "take the job or else." Undaunted by Reed's insistence he take the job, Wofford eventually was allowed to leave the system without any of the threatened repercussions taking place.

Fueled by teacher discontent, a lack of trust, low morale, unprofessional treatment and Reed's habit of micro-managing everything at the high school, the administration's problems were highlighted in the results of a survey taken in late 2001 by a Dr. Gary Benton of Meridian in which Reed and Price (who was principal at the time) fared very poorly.

The survey consisted of 38 questions designed to assess various factors associated with school climate and teacher morale at the

high school. The results of the survey revealed "low teacher morale and indicated the school climate was characterized by a high level of anxiety and frustration on the part of the faculty." According to the survey, teachers perceived administrators as being non-supportive and sometimes hostile. Many teachers expressed concern over the large number of "write-ups" and, while the majority of teachers indicated they liked their jobs, most agreed that students were not enthusiastic about learning and that a common vision was lacking.

The survey results also revealed there were several agendas, other than instruction, affecting the climate. "Not all teachers are on the same page. There seems to be a division between those who live in the community and those who drive in from other communities. Some have the perception that teachers are not all treated fairly or consistently. There is general concern relative to the enforcement of discipline policies. There is little or no evidence of teamwork between teachers and administrators."

Benton categorized the school's problems as: 1) a lack of communication; 2) lack of support/inconsistency on the part of the administrators in dealing with faculty; 3) lack of faculty support of administrators; 4) inconsistency in enforcing discipline policies; and 5) a large number of write-ups.

"It is my opinion that the situation has reached a critical stage and must be dealt with immediately," said Dr. Benton. "Responses to item (question) No. 21 (most problems facing this school can be solved by the principal and faculty) is of particular concern...and illustrates the severity of the morale problem."

Now, as I indicated earlier, an in-depth look at Reed's 12-plus years as superintendent would reveal dozens of similar instances which would cast serious doubt as to her claim that she had a "stellar career" here in Aberdeen. Suffice to say the three examples quoted above are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg and I would dare say anyone with firsthand knowledge of what has transpired over the years would agree that "stellar" would not be an apt description of Reed's career as superintendent of the Aberdeen school system.

Next week: Reed's biggest problem – the hiring, promotion and/or retention of qualified personnel.



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Subscription Rates:
12 Weeks— \$12.00
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"We must remember that a single determined person can make a significant difference. A small group of determined people can change the course of history."

...Sonia Johnson