

THERE'S NO RESISTING THIS PLACE, OUR VALLEY



BY DAVID LEIBOWITZ TRIBUNE

News of the job came to me out of a journalism magazine, back when people still read magazines.

A classified ad proclaimed the need for a newspaper columnist in a place called Mesa. This was 1994. I was working in Trenton, New Jersey then. I was 30 years old. Everything I knew about Arizona could fill half a grocery list: Hot. Grand Canyon. Goldwater. That weird Nicolas Cage flick with the baby.

Still, we took a chance on each other, me and the Tribune, me and the Valley. That seems to be the way for so many of us who migrate to the desert. We come on a whim, because why not Arizona? We come in search of something: a bigger paycheck, more freedom, less hassle a fresh start.

If we're lucky, Arizona delivers what we came looking for. And if we're supremely lucky – Powerball gazillionaire lucky – we find an even better prize.

We find the thing we brought along, but never before recognized. We find ourselves.

This April will mark 21 years since my Ryder rental truck pulled into the old Tri-

bune parking lot on West 1st Avenue. The few newspapers I've saved feel withered and worn out. That makes sense: So does my back after 18 holes of golf. But Arizona memories have a way of staying with you. They're not ink on paper. More like tattoos on skin.

What do I recall? Going west on Main Street to The Landmark restaurant to ravage the Ellis' salad bar. Or going far east on Main all the way to Apache Junction, to bet quinellas at the rickety old greyhound track.

I bought my first grown man suit at the old Macy's in Fiesta Mall; saw my first scorpion in an apartment near Val Vista and the 60; witnessed my first armed robbery in a Dirty Drummer in Chandler. The newspaper job introduced me to Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who sneaked me onto his chain gang one 110-degree day, and to the kin of a little girl named Mikelle Biggs, who vanished one afternoon 17 years ago and took with her a hunk of a million hearts.

I'm 50 years old now, softer around the waist, a little harder around the heart. Virtually every good thing in my life, except the love of my family and hometown pals, traces back to the adult the Valley helped

me become. There's a wife now, a sweet blonde girl as beautiful inside as she is out, a home, friends, a business helping people, companies and candidates tell their stories.

Like you, I often stop and thank Heaven that I have ended up with far more than I deserve. Then, 20 minutes later, I get cut off by a snowbird on the 202 and curse every square mile of Valley roadway. I look back fondly at Gonzo's soft single that brought us the 2001 World Series and angrily at those great Suns teams that brought us only heartache. Our Legislature still makes me shake my head in confusion. And I rarely turn on the radio without recalling the smooth tones of the late Bill Heywood or the snarky smarts of Barry Young, now gone from the AM airwaves.

This morning, I find myself back on these pages, catching up with old friends. What have I learned?

Over time, Arizona carves us into grown-ups as surely as it carved a wondrous canyon from rock. There is no resisting this place and no immunity from time. If we're lucky, we grow wiser. And if we're supremely lucky, we fall in love and grow to call this Valley home.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

EDUCATION

GOP wins; kids lose

Our GOP-controlled state Senate recently got exactly what they have been wanting to do for a long time: their quest to destroy Arizona's public schools. Senate Bill 1279 will phase our taxpayer dollars toward Arizona's voucher program or now known as Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA). These ESAs that GOP lawmakers insist upon are for one reason only: to pocket more funds into wallets of those who own the private schools, some of whom are also our GOP lawmakers. Why does this continue to happen? The votes of parents who have kids in public schools who don't care or pay attention to what is happening and how they want to destroy and privatize public education, keep voting their party to keep these radical GOP legislators in office. The only way to save public education is to quit voting for these legislators who have no interest in our voice, our schools and our kids' education. They just care about themselves and how they can make more profits at taxpayer expense and privatize education. It's time to vote for candidates who want to save public education, not your party.

Peter Thomas

Gilbert

PROP 124

Arizona Chamber says 'yes' to pension proposition

The Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry strongly urges you to vote yes on Proposition 124. We believe the measure represents the best opportunity to preserve critical public safety services while protecting taxpayers. Arizona's public safety pension system has been unable to keep pace with liability growth. A creaking public pension system that cannot keep up with growing obligations will begin to crowd out core government functions as more and more taxpayer dollars are shifted to pension liabilities, while raises, hiring and equipment upgrades will become extremely difficult. Unless we act, we will be faced with two bad options: Either severely cut services or dramatically raise taxes. Fortunately, thanks to state Sen. Debbie Lesko and her colleagues in the state Legislature, Gov. Doug Ducey, representatives of public safety employees, local government leaders and the Reason Foundation, a respected think tank, legislation has been signed into law that takes a major step toward stemming the growth in unfunded liabilities. The reform package is a game changer. The last step, however, is up to us. We must pass Proposition 124 to amend the state Constitution in order to alter the pension system's future benefit increases. If we want to ensure that our police officers and firefighters have retirement benefits they can count on in the future while protecting taxpayer dollars, then serious

COMMENTARY

GILBERT SCHOOL DISTRICT FACES SCHOOL CLOSING OPTIONS



BY MIKE MCCLELLAN
GUEST COMMENTARY

What would you expect from a crowd of parents and students at a forum to possibly close a school?

A Trump-like circus, of shouting, threatening, name-calling, all caused by overheated emotions?

Any more all too often that's the typical behavior at a meeting like that.

But recently, Gilbert Public Schools conducted a public hearing on possibly closing either Gilbert Junior High or Mesquite Junior High in order to provide a better facility for the district's Gilbert Classical Academy.

And surprise.

Adults behaved like, well, adults.

That's right. Instead of mimicking a fifth-grade playground football game, the folks who spoke at the hearing were clearly emotional about their schools. But they were respectful of others, thoughtful, articulate and polite.

Exactly what you wouldn't expect.

Particularly since one of the district's

board members poured fuel on the potential fire the day of the hearing.

Daryl Colvin, not known for understatement or subtly, had this to say on social media: "Meeting tonight for public comment on GCA relocation. Come and give the board your comments so that we can go and do what were going to do anyway, without your input, but you'll feel like you participated."

In other words, Mr. Colvin would like participants to believe that the forum was a dog and pony show.

Fortunately, as usual, Mr. Colvin was ignored.

The situation the board faces is this:

GCA is a top-rated school - based largely on its Advanced Placement tests success - in the state and the nation.

And it is housed in a woefully inadequate facility, with too few labs, no real athletic or performance facilities and decaying buildings.

The current facility was never to be its permanent home.

So the current board is looking at these options: close either Gilbert Junior or Mesquite Junior, or create a school within a school at

Mesquite, housing both the junior high and GCA.

(The logical choice would be to build a new facility for GCA, but since the state took over funding that, it has reduced the funding to just those emergency repairs and for districts experiencing rapid growth. So, Gilbert's out of luck there).

The hearing featured logical arguments from all three groups, and the board will no doubt have a difficult time making the decision.

However, if the remarks made about the school within a school option reflect the community at large, that option might be off the table, since all groups seemed to dislike it.

So sometime in April, the board will make a decision that will please GCA students and parents, and anger one of the two junior highs.

My guess? The board repurposes Gilbert Junior High and moves GCA into that facility, with the majority of the junior high kids moved to Mesquite.

My other guess? The board election in November will once again be an ugly affair.

• **Mike McClellan is a Gilbert resident**