

OUR VIEW: COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

Area's need for Phuture Phoenix continues

The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay's Phuture Phoenix program is welcoming its largest-ever class of fifth-graders to campus this week, marking yet another milestone for this impressive initiative.

Co-founded in 2003 by Cyndie Shepard, wife of former UWGB Chancellor Bruce Shepard, the effort to raise college aspirations for our area's young people has evolved from a beneficial but limited partnership to a large-scale community program. Three other college campuses — Western Washington University, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and, most recently, Silver Lake College in Manitowoc — have launched their own programs modeled after this phenomenal initiative.

Phuture Phoenix Day activities that began Tuesday and continue Thursday will have drawn an estimated 1,400 students from 13 Green Bay School District elementary schools and nine other area school districts. More than 250 UWGB students will have served as tour guides and in other roles to assist the fifth-graders, who come from low-income schools, and more than 90 UWGB faculty members will have opened their classrooms to students during the campus visit, Phuture Phoenix Director Kim Desotell said Monday.

This week's activities are the most visible part of what the award-winning Phuture Phoenix program does to raise college aspirations for these students, many of whom would be the first in their families to attend college. Ongoing mentor relationships and tutoring offer the chance for UWGB students to further connect with the children involved in the program and build lasting relationships.

We are impressed with the way Phuture Phoenix has evolved, continuing its steadfast focus on helping our area's young people — many of whom have never before set foot on a college campus — envision their future as students of higher learning. The program could have become less of a priority after Cyndie Shepard's departure in 2008 — she's since begun one of its spinoffs at Western Washington, where Bruce Shepard is president — but its champions at UWGB and throughout greater Green Bay ensured it remained strong and vibrant.

The first fifth-grade Phuture Phoenix class graduated high school in June, and more than 10,000 fifth-graders have been involved with the program to date. Also during the last school year, Green Bay's Jefferson Elementary School — where 90 percent of students are economically disadvantaged — started a school-wide program in conjunction with Phuture Phoenix, aiming to reach kids even earlier than fifth grade.

Convincing youth to pursue higher education, whether at UWGB or elsewhere, is more important than ever as Wisconsin is at an economic crossroads and has a percentage of baccalaureate degree holders that lags behind neighboring states. Just more than a quarter of state residents ages 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher; about the same percentage of degree-holders we have in Brown County. That compares with about 31 percent in neighboring Minnesota and 27 percent nationwide, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

We applaud the success of this program and encourage its leaders to continue to think big about helping the children Phuture Phoenix serves. It truly is a model for the kind of collaboration and innovation our community needs to help foster a brighter tomorrow for us all.



► See Joe Heller's cartoons at www.greenbaypressgazette.com

Religious literacy matters

Twenty-first century America is the most religiously diverse society on earth and — among developed countries — one of the most religious.

But how much do inhabitants of our faith-saturated land actually know about religion? Not very much, according to a new survey released Sept. 28 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Fewer than half of Americans know that Martin Luther inspired the Reformation, the Dalai Lama is Buddhist, the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday and other basic facts about the world's major faiths.

Being religious in America, it would appear, doesn't translate into knowledge about religions, including one's own. According to the survey, 45 percent of American Catholics, for example, are unaware that their church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion do not merely symbolize but actually become the body and blood of Christ. And 43 percent of Jews do not recognize that Maimonides, one of the most venerated rabbis in history, was Jewish.

But does a high level of religious illiteracy in America really matter? With so many other knowledge gaps to worry about — science and math, for instance — should we care that only 27 percent of us know that most Indonesians are Muslim?

Yes, we should. Religious literacy matters because religion matters. For better and for worse, religious convictions help shape events and



CHARLES C. HAYNES
Commentary

public policies in the U.S. and throughout the world. As we learned early on confronting sectarian violence in Iraq, what we don't know about religion can hurt us.

Religious literacy also matters because religious freedom matters. Ignorance breeds intolerance and prejudice, as evidenced in our own history by periodic outbreaks of nativism and the persistence of anti-Semitism.

In the current climate of uncertainty and fear, a little knowledge (especially when based on propaganda from the Internet) can do considerable harm. Witness the anti-mosque protests around the country this summer fueled by dissemination of distorted, incomplete and often ugly misinformation about Islam and American Muslims.

One obvious fix for religious illiteracy is for public schools to do a better job teaching about the major world religions. But doing that would depend in part on public understanding of the First Amendment. Here again, the Pew survey is the bearer of bad news.

While most people (89 percent) correctly understand that Supreme Court decisions bar public school teachers from leading their classes in prayer, many incorrectly believe that reli-

gion has been banned from classrooms altogether.

Sixty-seven percent mistakenly believe that teachers aren't permitted to "read from the Bible as an example of literature," even though teaching about the Bible as literature is constitutional, as many Supreme Court justices have repeatedly stated. And 51 percent wrongly think teachers can't "offer a class comparing the world's religions," even though a small, but growing, number of school districts offer electives in world religions.

Contrary to popular perception that public schools are religion-free zones, social studies standards and textbooks now include coverage of the major religious traditions, although much of this remains superficial. Most of this material has been added during the past 15 years, largely without controversy.

Despite the challenges, schools need to take religious literacy seriously. Unless Americans learn something about one another, how will we negotiate our religious differences in the years ahead? How will we prepare young people for living in a world where religion plays an increasingly important role?

What we need is a national conversation about the constitutional role of religion in American public life. Beyond shouting and name-calling, we urgently need a better understanding of our history — and one another.

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ANOTHER VIEW



LET'S CHAT

The Brown County United Way is in the thick of its annual campaign to raise money for the 45 programs it funds. At noon Thursday, the Press-Gazette will host an online chat with 2010 campaign chairman Larry Borgard, president and CEO of Wisconsin Public Service, as well as United Way president and CEO Gregg Hetue, to discuss this year's effort. Log onto www.greenbaypressgazette.com to offer your comments and questions.

ONLINE TODAY

We post tomorrow's editorial every afternoon. Go to the Community Conversation blog at WWW.GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM to tell us what you think before it appears in print.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Why is political career seen as negative?

GREEN BAY — Just wondering why 18 years of experience as a politician is somehow a negative, while similar experience as a businessperson is a positive — the implication suggesting dishonesty and incompetence for one and honesty and righteousness for the other.

Seems to me he who proposes such characterization is guilty of a most insidious form of mudslinging while at the same time nullifying any respectability to his accusations regarding his opponent's "dirty" behavior. I know of no more an honest, hard working, concerned senator than Russ Feingold, and for anyone to besmirch Russ' reputation by such deceptive innuendo constitutes a total act of desperation on the part of the perpetrator.

And lastly, 57 lawyers in the Senate and only one accountant: Is Ron Johnson resorting to dirty tactics by implying lawyers are somehow dishonest but not so accountants? Wow.

Ronald Goska

Candidates should run on record

DE PERE — I went to the Reid Ribble-Steve Kagen debate Thursday at St. Norbert College. Immediately Rep. Kagen implied that Ribble, a businessman, is a professional politician, while he is not.

Kagen is now a two-term congressman running for a third. Kagen proudly voted for the stimulus (an expensive failure) and government regulation of our health care. He also voted for cap-and-trade, which would impose heavy taxes on individuals and businesses (a real job killer), and would, in President Barack Obama's words — necessarily bankrupt the coal companies and caused energy bills to "skyrocket." Even though Kagen's ad tarring Ribble with the "he wants to take away your social security" brush is called dishonest by both the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and The (Appleton) Post-Crescent, he continued to repeat it. This scare tactic is pulled out every election.

Ribble said the subject of Social Security has been "demagogued" and needs to be thoughtfully addressed so that it's there for future generations. Kagen said it is sound, but the 2009 Trustee's report says Social Security faces massive deficits within seven years and will spend more than it takes in by 2016. Run on the record — lying to win is politics as usual.

Kristine Meulemans

Neville can be revitalized

GREEN BAY — The Neville Public Museum of Brown County suffers the same malaise that the Milwaukee Public Museum did for decades: lack of vision, declining attendance, bureaucratic burdens from county government and an ineffectual board.

The solution for Milwaukee was cutting the bureaucratic red tape through privatization; staff cuts; blockbuster shows; aggressive fundraising; new, young diverse leadership on the board; and general improvement of morale and inspired vision. All that and more can happen if Brown County and Neville Foundation boards are willing to make the necessary changes to the administration of the museum and build a new board that is diverse, truly community-minded and provides financial and necessary leadership — not just words of revitalization.

The museum operation needs to be streamlined. The permanent exhibits have not changed in four decades. I've seen this problem again and again in dozens of museums throughout the United States. There are solutions, but most of the time not the willpower or vision to make the necessary changes. It can be done, and Milwaukee did it.

Tony Rajer

LETTERS FOR COMMUNITY VIEWS

We appreciate the time that it takes to compose a letter to the Community Views and your willingness to share your thoughts with other Press-Gazette readers. We decide whether to publish a letter based on the number we receive, the interest a letter has for local readers and the contribution it makes to the public dialogue. We have a 200-word limit on all letters and a strong preference for those that are about issues and events in

Northeastern Wisconsin. Writers are limited to one letter every 30 days. We do not publish poetry; letters that are libelous or attack other writers; third-party, consumer-complaint and thank-you letters; and letters generated by political campaigns or special-interest groups and signed by local people. We do not publish anonymous letters and confirm all letters before publication. We require an address and phone number to call for verification,

but only your name and the community in which you live will appear in Community Views.
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The Press-Gazette strives, as it has since 1915, to be the primary provider of information in Northeastern Wisconsin, keeping the welfare and development of the Greater Green Bay area at heart. It is our responsibility to provide a forum for free and open expression of diverse opinions while maintaining the public trust necessary to serve our readers, advertisers, employees and stockholders.

THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.