

Tarryl Clark: DFL's rising star soaks up spotlight at Capitol

By G.R. ANDERSON JR.

Mid-session Fridays are sometimes a ho-hum affair at the Capitol. But media conferences are held on that day to review the past week and preview the week ahead, something the DFL caucus often does by putting Tarryl Clark in front of reporters.

One Friday morning last month, Clark, a state senator from St. Cloud, readied to meet the press before a polished wood conference table in a hearing room. The media savvy Clark always banter with the assembled scribes, talking heads and camera jockeys before getting down to official proceedings. (She's also normally dressed in some shade of blue.) On this day, murmurs around the Capitol were that Gov. Tim Pawlenty had hopped a flight out of town, presumably to Washington, D.C.

Clark, who possesses a sharp tongue and tenacity, rarely misses a chance to take a loyal oppositional swipe at the governor, and she uttered something about a "super-secret" trip by Pawlenty in a tone that suggested a wink and a nod: Surely you guys will report on this, right? Then she held court on the business at hand, for all of about 15 minutes.

Reporters nibbled a bit on Pawlenty's absence from St. Paul, and Clark was happy to offer some red meat. "The governor's focus may be a stumbling block," she said at one point. "Depends on whether he's here or not." And, later: "If his words were a bridge, I'd be afraid to cross it."

Her words were wry, with no hint of anger. And they had the effect of painting Pawlenty as, like Clark often puts it, an



MinnPost photo by RAOUL BENAVIDES

Tarryl Clark, a state senator from St. Cloud, has become the face of the DFL at the Capitol.

"absentee governor."

At the end, one rumor that was hanging in the air finally came as a question: Have you thought about running for governor?

"I have people talk to me ..." Clark said, before trailing off briefly. "I've had enough people talk to me about it that I do think about it."

That was, for the record, not a no.

Not a household name — yet

Don't worry if you haven't heard much of Clark. She hardly ranks with the semi-household names like Sviggum and Moe of

recent Capitol eras of the past, or even her contemporaries like long-timers Rep. Phyllis Kahn or Sen. Dick Day. Clark has only been in office since late 2005, when she won in a special election and was re-elected in 2006.

But increasingly, Clark is the face of the DFL at the Capitol. Though the party controls both chambers, and House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher and House Majority Leader Tony Sertich are high-profile, Clark often soaks up her share of the spotlight.

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MINNPOST.WORLD

Bush's Mideast trip: long on pageantry, short on substance

By DOUG STONE

Presidential trips abroad are always part symbolic, part ceremonial and part substantive. President Bush's five-day trip to the Middle East, which begins today in Israel, will be short on substance, most analysts agree, with low expectations for much progress in the peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

"In some ways, this is the roadshow cast of *Waiting for Godot*," Anthony H. Cordesman, a Middle East expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, told *The New York Times*' Sheryl Gay Stolberg. "He said the trip would 'basically set a marker while everybody waits for the next president.'"

The president's visit is complicated by a number of factors, Stolberg reports:

"Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, is embroiled in a criminal investigation that threatens his job. The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, left Washington disappointed after a recent meeting with Mr. Bush. Although the peace talks continue, the two sides are far apart on the core issues that divide them, and the White House press secretary, Dana Perino, has said progress is 'more halting' than Mr. Bush would like. The talks are so tenuous that even Stephen J. Hadley, Mr. Bush's ever-optimistic national security adviser, conceded there was little reason for the three leaders to get together. Mr. Bush will meet Mr. Olmert in Jerusalem and see Mr. Abbas separately in Sharm el Sheik, Egypt."

Hezbollah gains in Beirut

In addition, violence continues between Hamas and the Israeli military in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah has taken over part of Beirut, further weakening the Lebanese government.

"The pageantry of President Bush's trip to the Middle East this week is sure to be impressive," reports Peter Grier of *The Christian Science Monitor*. "On May

15, he'll tour the ancient fortress of Masada, then commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of Israel with an address to the Knesset. The next day he'll travel to Saudi Arabia to help mark the 75th anniversary of formal US-Saudi relations." He's also expected to ask the Saudis to increase oil production.

The president will address leaders at the World Economic Forum in Sharm el-Sheik and meet personally with key Mideast leaders while there.

"The substance of the journey, however, is unlikely to live up to the White House's once-high expectations," *The Monitor's* Grier says. "Last year, the White House tried to jump-start the Middle East peace process by hosting Israeli and Palestinian leaders at an Annapolis, Md., conference. Today, there seems little chance that Bush will help deliver an outline for real Israeli-Palestinian peace before he leaves office."

A real Olmert-Abbas relationship

But behind the scenes some interesting developments are taking place, according to former peace negotiator Aaron David Miller, who was interviewed by Bernard Gwertzman for the Council on Foreign Relations.

"For the first time in the history of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, you have a real relationship between an elected Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, and an elected Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas," Miller said.

"Weak and constrained though they both may be, the two of them have been having, even before Annapolis, a set of very quiet but fairly regular discussions on the core issues: Jerusalem, borders, refugees, and security. ... Those discussions could in the course of the next six months or so lead to an agreement on a text, on a piece of paper – not a peace treaty as the president has said several months ago, not a detailed framework agreement – but perhaps a declaration of principles

on these four issues ... that will go further than any Israeli- and Palestinian-elected politicians have ever gone before. That is the first reality.

"The second is a set of very complicated, tricky negotiations – three-way negotiations that the Egyptians are brokering between Israel on one hand and Hamas on the other. ... If these two things come to fruition you just might see by the end of the year the administration passing on to its Republican or Democratic successor something that looks pretty good, not a Palestinian state, not a peace treaty, but something that the next Republican or Democratic president won't be able to walk away from."

But other observers aren't convinced the administration, which critics have said had a hands-off attitude towards the peace process for much of the past seven years, will have much success.

"If the president brings the prestige and the weight of his office to the region, and leaves the parties without having moved the process forward, he only damages his prestige," argues Martin Indyk, a former ambassador to Israel. "He devalues his currency. And that's what it looks like we're going to see."

Joharah Baker writes in the *Daily Star* of Beirut that to "an outsider, the (Bush) plan has the potential to be optimistically real. Palestinians must end violence and Israel must freeze settlement activity and commit to the establishment of a two-state solution. ...

"However, to those of us on the inside, the road map was always bound to lead down the proverbial drain like all the incomprehensive and insufficient agreements before it. The reason is plain and simple, but one which eludes the major 'peacemakers' in this conflict. As long as the road map, or any other agreement ... does not unequivocally address and demand an end to Israel's military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, nothing will ever come good."

While the outlines of a peace

settlement have been discussed for years and favored by many on both sides of the conflict, the problem is in the details and, more importantly, in the emotional commitment each side has to its position.

Steps Bush could take

On the one hand, the *Jerusalem Post* argues: "No one can blame President Bush for not having ended the Arab-Israeli conflict. And yet there are steps he could take to leave our region better off than when he took office. He could unambiguously tell the relative moderates among the Palestinians that their demand for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 Armistice Lines is unrealistic; that their claims to a 'right of return,' which would spell the demographic destruction of Israel, should be abandoned; and he could press Abbas to use his Western-trained and -equipped forces to tackle the terrorist infrastructure right under his nose. Finally, Bush could point out that no progress will be made until Abbas prepares his people for genuine reconciliation with Israel."

On the other hand, Daniel Kattab, a Palestinian, writes in *The Washington Post*: "What Palestinians want is for Israel to admit its historic and moral role in creating the refugee problem and its moral responsibility to them. Such an admission by a courageous Israeli leader would satisfy, and neutralize, many Palestinians who hold their keys and demand the literal right of return. As part of a bilateral agreement, surely Israel would allow divided Palestinian families to reunite with relatives who stayed in what became Israel after 1948."

Read the complete article at www.minnpost.com.

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Google's golden ticket: Freshman scores big with her art



CHRISTINA CAPECCHI

Becca Olene's artwork has graced the front of the family fridge and the walls of her Chaska school. Next week, the 14-year-old's colored-pencil illustration may anchor Google's home page.

In a quest for a 24-hour replacement to the search engine's home page icon, which changes to commemorate holidays and special events, Google is hosting a Doodle 4 Google Competition among U.S. residents ages 5 to 18. Google has hosted the competition in England and Australia before, but this marks the first American contest of the sort.

More than 16,000 students submitted their artwork, and Google selected 400 finalists, picking eight from each state, and two from each age bracket. Then the web powerhouse narrowed it down to 100 regional finalists. That's when Becca got the call that sent her jumping: She had made the cut, landing among an elite 2 percent of contestants.

Now she's packing for an award ceremony at the Googleplex in Mountain View, Calif., a complimentary trip that is akin to a golden ticket inside Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. There the national winner will be announced May 21, and his or her art will "go live" on Google's homepage May 22.

Becca heard about the

competition from a friend and immediately began brainstorming. "I really like art and I thought I might have a chance with this," the Carver resident said. She considered the given theme, "What if...?", a question Google says is designed to inspire young people to see (and illustrate) the world not as it is, but as it may be.

Initially, Becca considered a fantasy theme, but then ruled it out for being too common. She kicked around a few more ideas, and then the rainforest concept tumbled into her mind. It was a good fit for the environmentally conscious animal lover who owns two pet chinchillas.

Next, she examined some tropical animals on — where else? — Google images. Then she set pencil to paper.

Perfecting the shape of Toucan was the hardest part, but when she arrived at the tiger, which represents the second "o" in Google, her pencil glided with ease. Tigers happen to be one of Becca's fortés.

From the first sketches to the final shading, the entire drawing took only three hours.

Then she wrote a brief explanation of her theme: "What if Rainforests were saved? In the future, what if there were rainforests everywhere? What if people could work together to preserve and restore nature instead of destroying it? The world's rainforests are shrinking and many species have lost their habitat because of humans. What if we could change this?"

Vote for the toucan

Now Becca's campaigning for online votes, which will help determine the national winner. She created a Facebook group that has garnered 160 members so far and has posted a link to the contest on her MySpace account. Her mom, Hollie, has sent out a few mass emails soliciting votes, and an administrator at Pioneer Ridge Freshmen Center in Chaska made an announcement over the PA system.

"People I don't normally talk to at school have been voting and telling me about it," Becca said. Though she's a shy middle child who prefers Guitar Hero to public speaking, she's enjoying the attention. "I like it," she acknowledged.

The voting period began Monday and ends May 18. During that time, Becca's illustration is featured alongside the other regional finalists in a Google gallery. She scouted out the competition and was most impressed by an Arkansas girl who asked, "What if...everything I drew came to life?" But over all, she wasn't too intimidated. "I think I have a pretty good chance."

The winner will receive a \$10,000 college scholarship, and his or her school will receive a \$25,000 grant toward the establishment or enhancement of a computer lab.

To win, and have her art viewed by some 4 million people — and likely more, given the buzz the competition

is generating — would mark a huge leap from the last competition Becca entered: a coloring contest at Cooper's Grocery Store in Chaska.

Her classmates recognized her artistic talent long ago. In second grade during recess, they would ask her for drawings. "Mainly mermaids and Pokemon," she said.

Mutual benefits

Now Becca is old enough to recognize the value of such an honor. "I think it would look good on a college application."

The freshman is brainy and well-rounded, a member of the Knowledge Bowl who earned straight A's last quarter, but drawing is her chief passion and her career aspiration.

Google may appear altruistic by flying 40 youngsters to Mountain View, but it has plenty to gain from Doodle 4 Google: increased web traffic, good will and an opportunity to gain traction in thousands of schools, which were required to formally register in order to submit their students' art work.

It's also a way to build Google love and loyalty among young people while conducting something of a talent search. Although, it may be a while before Google needs to replace its current doodler: Dennis Hwang is only 29.

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

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Part of that is by design, especially in regard to Senate politics. There, Sen. Larry Pogemiller is the majority leader, but Clark shares many caucus duties in her assistant leader role. And Pogemiller has a reputation for, to put it charitably, an obstinacy that in the past infuriated GOP leaders, Capitol insiders and Pawlenty. And it doesn't hurt that Clark is a politician from outside the metro area who happens to be a woman. From that perspective, her rising role makes political sense.

But Clark also possesses what many consider an ambition that is notable even by Capitol standards, and a gift for laying down spin with the best of them.

"I would not debate any of those points," says Sen. Geoff Michel, a Republican from Edina who has worked with and against Clark during her short tenure. "She's also bright and articulate. She's clearly the voice of that caucus."

"We view her as what she appears to be: a spokesman for the DFL caucus," adds Sen. David Senjem, a GOPer from Rochester who as the Senate minority leader is something of a counterpoint to Clark. "But she acts not unlike the rest of us in that she's just a member of the Senate."

For her part, Clark already displays a politician's insouciance on her aspirations. "I don't think of myself that way," Clark says at mention of her ambition. "If there's a way I can contribute that's different than what I'm currently doing, I should take a look at that. I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing now."

But Clark is hardly resolute in staying put in her Senate seat, or dismissive of a gubernatorial bid. "No, I'm not ruling it out. I don't know what I'm going to do, I'm not focused on that right now," she offers by way of not quite brushing the question aside. "It's an odd thing to be thinking about when we have a presidential election, to be thinking about running for governor."

And certainly the notion is premature; there's still plenty that can happen in the waning days of the session, let alone whatever the political landscape might look like two

years from now. But at least one person thinks she's cut out for the job: Her mother, Sandra Donley, who lives just west of Phoenix. "I have said that to her before," Donley says. "'You could be governor, Tarryl.'"

A Republican background

But Donley's endorsement of Gov. Clark, to hear both women tell it, is hardly a foregone conclusion emanating from motherly pride. "I'm a registered Republican," Donley points out.

"I grew in a Republican family, and I voted Republican when I first started voting," Clark admits, saying that she was hewing to her family members' core beliefs. "They're pretty moderate. They believe that it's important to make investments, but they didn't like the idea of government being in people's lives, local control, values I still hold. Things I don't necessarily see the Republican Party doing."

A cynic might see a ploy here — a leader of the less-than-moderate Minnesota DFL Party trying to position herself as a moderate who can work both sides of the aisle, unite Minnesotans, yadda, yadda, yadda ... But Clark appears sincere. Any time the Senate is in session, Clark can be seen consulting fellow senators from both parties. And in this session of trying to solve a nearly \$1 billion state budget shortfall, Clark — and therefore her caucus — have focused on fiscal issues, while not exactly clamping down on spending.

"She's focused on measuring and benchmarking government, and could be considered Republican-like for good state government," Michel suggests, adding that Clark already walks "a fine line." "The tension Senator Clark has is her caucus is more liberal than her district. Things in St. Paul might not play in St. Cloud."

Given her background, Clark may well come by that straddling naturally. At the very least, she has plenty of first-hand experience in understanding voters in her Republican-leaning District 15, starting early in her own home.

Her father, Bob Donley, was in the Navy, and Clark was born on a military base in Norfolk, Va. Clark has three younger brothers,

two of whom served in the Navy, she says, and that may account for her toughness to a degree. Clark is petite and young (46) for a power player. But she has a raspy voice of authority and efficiency, and laughs loud, Hillary-like, and often.

Until Clark was in sixth grade, the family grew up in Glenview, Ill., then headed west to the Phoenix area. Clark eventually went to college at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and it's not a stretch to say she shares some of the fictional attributes of that school's mascot, the Bulldog. As the school's men's basketball team made its improbable run into the NCAA tournament, Clark never missed a moment to brag to reporters.

(Full disclosure: I went to Drake as well, but not at the time Clark attended. Her parents and my father also went to Drake and knew each other, but have not remained in touch over the years. I did not know this going into reporting this story.)

Twenty years ago, Clark and her husband, Doug, who attended St. John's, moved to Minnesota, mostly because they didn't like the low-tax, low-service lifestyle in the state of Arizona.

"Phoenix had all the disadvantages of a big city, but not so much of the advantages," Clark says, lamenting a lack of amenities like libraries and parks. "Minnesota's values really fit who we are. When I think about what Minnesota is about, we thought, what a great place to raise our kids, so we moved here."

Clark eventually earned her JD from William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul. Her husband worked for Legal Aid. The couple has two sons: Colin, 22, who works for the Central Minnesota Boys & Girls Clubs, and Nathan, 20, who is a student at the U of M.

Though Clark insists that through the years she had no political aspirations, in some ways politics may have been inevitable. "She's always been involved in leadership," her mother, who is still active in the real estate market in Phoenix, says, sounding off a list of school activities that Clark assumed over the years. "Tarryl

and I are very similar in that we just jump right in a go for it."

'I was never going to run for office'

Clark's resume at the Capitol might be slim — though growing — but her CV otherwise shows a flurry of activism. She's worked for Habitat for Humanity, the local Girl Scouts chapter, the Northwest Area Foundation, clerked in the Attorney General's office and most recently served as head of the Community Action Association, a consortium of community groups that aim to fight poverty.

"Predominantly on senior and public benefits issues," is how Clark frames her causes of interest. "What I found out there was families and kids, no matter how much they were trying to get their lives together, often ran into system barriers."

And this is how Clark eventually came to the political arena. Soon she was a vice chair for the DFL Party. Then she was registered as a lobbyist at the Capitol for the Community Action Association from February 1999 until December 2005, when she won her Senate seat. This experience, Clark says, not only showed her how things work at the Legislature, but also forged a number of bonds with lobbyists and lawmakers alike. Plus, it put her in touch with several organizers and activists around the state.

"I was never going to run for office," Clark insists.

But soon enough, that's what she was doing, first running for Senate in 2000 against Dave Kleis and challenging him again in 2002 for the District 15 Senate seat. Kleis won both times, but when he was elected mayor of St. Cloud in 2005, Clark ran again, this time against a conservative talk-radio personality named Dan "Ox" Oschner.

Oschner knew he'd have his work cut out for him because Clark was already well-known from other campaigns. "She'd been on the ballot so many times people thought she was an incumbent," Oschner says.

Read the complete story at www.minnpost.com.

The Daily Glean: Tricking Pvt. Ryan

By DAVID BRAUER

Seems like TV sweeps month is all about suspected serial murderers (it was WCCO's turn last night) but Fox9's Jackie McLean has a less-speculative exposé: local Army recruiting misdeeds. Recruiters are shown on undercover camera coaching applicants to lie about drug use, overstating cash benefits tenfold, and eliding the likelihood of going to Iraq. The coup de grâce: promising an applicant she will "get a job at, you know, Fox9 News."

More recruiting: An Army commander says the actions are wrong, and four recruiters have been suspended pending an investigation. Context: McLean says there have been eight complaints against the Minneapolis office this year. Interesting cultural touch: I don't think I've ever seen TV news make local anti-war protesters look so credible; the report essentially corroborates their recruiting complaints, and the station isn't shy about saying so.

Is that screaming coming from the Mall of America's new water park? No, it's the Ghermezians yelping about the Legislature's new sock-Bloomington subsidy plan. The mall's ruling family says there's "no chance" the \$2 billion expansion will happen under the revised plan, the Strib's Mike Kaszuba reports. Just weeks ago, DFL leaders basked in construction-worker applause for supporting a statewide aid grab; now the plan seems dead. Someone should check back with those labor folks.

If you've ever scrambled for day care, pity the parents in west-central Minnesota's MACCRAY district. High gas costs and lagging school funding mean canceled Monday classes — all next year. The Strib's Maria Elena Baca says officials expect to save \$85,000 toward a \$200,000 deficit; they cut \$800,000 last year. Parents don't seem to mind, and state ed officials must sign off. The kids will go an extra hour

Tuesday-Friday, but get 23 Mondays to drive a designated non-teacher crazy.

Which is a fitting backdrop for this: School districts will get \$51 more per kid next year, if a state education bill becomes law. The money comes from gutting Gov. Pawlenty's pay-for-teacher-performance plan. In the PiPress, the gov's spokesman rips the "DFL education bill." MPR's Tom Scheck demurs: "a large number of Republicans" produced a veto-proof majority for the \$49 million plan. It's a one-year bump only.

Meanwhile, the Minneapolis school board put a \$60 million referendum on this fall's ballot, the Strib's Terry Collins reports. It would double the current operating levy, adding \$204 to a \$256,000 home's annual property-tax bill. The money will go to maintain class sizes; the last levy was supposed to cut them, but that didn't work out. Will parents — and other voters — feel burned? Optimism reigns. The eight-year plan would also pay for other program improvements.

Norm Coleman won't return 10 grand in donations from a D.C. firm that lobbied for Myanmar, AP reports. It was a big enough deal for John McCain to dump his GOP convention chair, but the Strib only runs four wire-service paragraphs; the PiPress runs 13; neither gives the story big play. Coleman's office says the contributions were legal — hey, so is lobbying for Myanmar, but that doesn't make it right!

After getting badly, badly burned by their own ownership, the Strib tries to catch up on yesterday's PiPress land-sale scoop. Strib owner Avista Capital Partners still won't talk to the home team about its five-block offering, but reporter Paul Levy does a workaround: He surveys nearby property owners who say, yeah, the Vikings are still pretty interested. Hey Avista — you're in labor negotiation: Earn brownie points and let your folks know

next time the competition calls.

The Wall Street Journal asks Minneapolis Federal Reserve President Gary Stern if we're going to avoid a recession. "No," he replies succinctly. He's not sure if this one will be deep. Stern also thinks the Fed will keep letting investment banks use the bank's credit, but the precedent will get policy-tweaking once the credit crisis has passed.

Talker! The Minnesota Court of Appeals ruled that a Chisholm, Minn., man doesn't get a new attorney if he beats the tar out of the old one. The PiPress' Emily Gurnon says William Lehman wanted a new attorney, so he punched public defender Mark Groettum repeatedly in the face until "blood was all over Groettum, the counsel table and the floor of the courtroom." The Appeals court said Lehman's "outrageous and manipulative conduct" meant he had to represent himself.

Talker II: KARE reports that "about 6,000" old-fashioned spinning-dial gas pumps can't register prices above \$3.99. There's an upgrade kit, but it's back-ordered for a year; otherwise, mom-and-pop filling station owners face \$10,000 bills for modern digital pumps.

The state education bill helped upset a peaceful budget resolution, though the Strib says the real snag was \$50 million from a state HMO reserve fund. Pawlenty made the banked cash out-of-bounds for budget-balancing; DFLers said Gov. Pawlenty had earlier agreed to use the money. Reporters Mark Brunswick and Norman Draper say HMOs could sue if denied reimbursements for maintaining too-hefty reserves.

As expected, Pawlenty vetoed a health-care-reform bill, MPR's Lorna Benson reports. The gov simply does not want access-fund surplus to be used 100 percent for access. MPR says the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce supports the veto,

even though it likes the bill's savings.

The PiPress' Jeremy Olson says Pawlenty vetoed a ban on possibly carcinogenic plastics from children's products like teething rings. Pawlenty said the bill "goes beyond current scientific research." He also didn't like a ban on possibly toxic fire retardants. Once again, the legislative margins were veto-proof, but it's possible bill proponents will reintroduce it next year. Why?

Kewl: 3M shows off a super-dinky projector that can be embedded in laptops, and even cell phones, the Strib's Dee DePass reports. It's the size of a 9-volt battery.

Hot button: MPR's Stephanie Hemphill on the next new amenity in federal parks: concealed guns. The U.S. Interior Department proposes allowing them; "the main reason ... is to bring federal land in line with state laws," an Interior spokesperson says. Last year, 40 million parks visitors produced 11 homicides and 373 other violent offenses.

Local transit advocates step carefully around U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar's comments yesterday providing light at the end of the light-rail tunnel. Locals tell the PiPress' Dave Orrick that no one wants a Washington Avenue tunnel. But, they add, we still love our pork-ladling transportation chair!

The PiPress' Jim Ragsdale offers a finely crafted obit for former state Capitol colleague Jack Coffman, who died Monday. As you might expect, he was a salty, fun guy, as is Rags, who offers this bit of Coffman lore: "He was the center on a very bad high school football team, to which he contributed several broken bones."

Nort spews: Bad defense doomed the Twins against Toronto; the 5-3 loss cuts their Central Division lead to a half-game over Cleveland.

COMMUNITY VOICES

The black experience in America ...

By RALPH REMINGTON

I remember rushing home on Friday nights to see “The Brady Bunch” and “The Partridge Family” on ABC-TV, followed by “The Odd Couple” and “Love American Style.” This is the black experience in America.

I remember having two portraits on the walls in my childhood home, one of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other of JFK. This is the black experience in America.

I remember, as a boy, dancing close with shapely teenage girls at house parties in dark basements over at my friends’ mom’s house. This is the black experience in America.

I remember the first time that I was called a nigger. This is the black experience in America.

I remember summer barbecues with great music and all of your relatives and friends singing, laughing and joking. This is the black experience in America.

I remember too many of my male friends gunned down in the streets and knifed at parties before they were old enough to grow facial hair. This is the black experience in America.

‘You’re not like them’

I remember my father telling me, “You’re not like them. Our people came over in slave ships.” This is the black experience in America.

I remember being told that we have two cultures and speak two languages. This is the black experience in America.

I remember feeling conflicted whenever I had to stand for the National Anthem or the Pledge of Allegiance. This is the black experience in America.

I remember enlisting and serving proudly in The United States Army ready to die for God and country. This is the black experience in America.

I remember my first white friend. This is the black experi-

ence in America.

I remember torn-up textbooks, broken lockers and crowded classrooms. This is the black experience in America.

Car rides, not Disneyland

I remember “family summer vacations” being day trips or taking car rides “out there” to see how white people lived and going to day camp at urban recreation centers, while white classmates spoke of going to Disneyland and meeting new friends at overnight camp while living in many of those big houses that I peered at from car windows, with my parents, with my bare legs sticking to hot vinyl car seats. This is the black experience in America.

I remember the Black Panthers walking proud through the neighborhood dressed in black leather. This is the black experience in America.

I remember going to church all day Sunday, starting with Sunday school and ending with a fried chicken dinner at home. This is the black experience in America.

I remember “American Bandstand” on Saturdays. This is the black experience in America.

The beginning of hip-hop

I remember hearing the beginning of hip-hop at a block party when I was a senior in high school jammin’ to the clean beats of the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” This is the black experience in America.

I remember being told by friends, family and society that I had limits. This is the black experience in America.

I remember rejecting all of that and learning that improvisation is my friend. This is also the black experience in America.

To be black in America means always being suspect or being open to the possibility of being suspect. To be black means frequently having to edit your comments out of fear of offending

white America. The same statement articulated by a white person may be deemed assertive — while coming out of a black mouth, it becomes aggressive. And one must keep in mind that black success in this society is commensurate with one’s ability to make white folks feel comfortable.

Why wouldn’t there be anger?

The most unbelievable thing to come out of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright incident was that so many white people could be so surprised at the level of anger that could come out of a black individual. Really? Are whites actually surprised that there is anger in the black community? Why wouldn’t there be? The black existence in America is a tragic, wonderful, heroic, bitter struggle originally commenced by a horrific forced trans-Atlantic voyage. Can anyone with a reasonable mind not think that a people with our history in these United States might not feel a bit of anger?

I think that the original emotion that blacks felt vis-a-vis America was hurt. Hurt that we could possibly be in a place where we are so often viewed as a nuisance in the least and with contempt in the worst. And those blacks who have the time, education and privilege, try to find some way to reconcile conflicting love/hate emotions that are traced back to our origins on these shores.

Anger is only one emotion to derive from the mother emotion of hurt. Some other derivative emotions are depression, sorrow, self-pity. Many African-Americans have used these emotions as a springboard to succeed against all odds. Others tend to get trapped in despair and follow a journey to destruction borne from the pathology of a system that kicks ass and takes names, caring nothing for the souls that it leaves behind.

I grew up in the Baptist Church. Most black preachers that

I’ve ever known have a seed of anger within them. It was a combination of this anger and a need to mentally reconcile their societal living conditions that many times led them to Christianity. Religion became a source of comfort, solace and focus. The most powerful Jesus narrative, for me, is that which illustrates him as a political revolutionary.

Church: a place of hearts and minds

The church was also a place where many of these preachers could enjoy control and sovereignty. Since the times of slavery, the church was the only place where black folks could speak their collective mind with impunity. Our sacred hearts have always been entwined with our political minds. Preachers led their congregants on slave revolts, as was the case with Nat Turner, or on a path to greater human liberty and freedom, as was the case with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

If white folks truly want to understand how it is to be black in America they must be willing to listen. They can’t start from a defensive adversarial place. They must be open, as if they are learning to speak a foreign language. One wouldn’t dream of telling the French teacher that what he or she is learning is incorrect if the accuser had never spoken French before.

We have to start learning to speak each other’s language. If blacks wish to be successful in America, they have no choice. On the other hand, whites have the privilege and the luxury to remain disinterested in black life. The only loser in that equation is ultimately America.

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