

A mysterious connection:

Autism and Minneapolis' Somali children

By ELIZABETH GORMAN

Short yellow school busses deliver children with special education needs to Minneapolis public schools every weekday morning. As students arrive at the elementary school where I work part time, I can't help but notice something about the autistic kids as they climb down the buses' steep steps: almost all are Somali children.

Autism is a developmental disorder that doesn't discriminate against race or class, and it is on the rise in the United States. But in Minneapolis, the mysterious disorder appears to be zeroing in on one of the city's newest communities: First generation U.S.-born Somali-speaking children in Minneapolis schools are disproportionately identified as having autism.

"We're definitely seeing it, and something is triggering it," said Dr. Chris Bentley, director of Fraser, a non-profit in Minneapolis that assists autistic children and their families.

Bentley is helping organize an unusual forum next month to discuss the issue. Members of the Somali community, autism advocates and officials at the state departments of health, education and human services have been invited to attend.

"This is something we're looking at first in Minneapolis and then in St. Paul, but this is a much bigger issue than that," she said, suggesting that studying what's going on in the Somali community in Minneapolis may provide to clues to understanding the causes of autism.



REUTERS

No conclusive research

It's not clear what's going on in other communities — such as St. Paul and Rochester, Minn. — with large numbers of Somali children because data there is less complete or unavailable.

And metro-area pediatricians couldn't confirm that there is higher incidence of autism among Somali children in the Twin Cities, noting that there's been little research on the question.

But, said Dr. Stacene Maroushek of Hennepin County Medical Center's pediatric

clinic, "the impression that there's an increasing rate of autism in the Somali community is definitely there. And people are wondering what's going on."

Maroushek said that while there is a need for more medical research on immigrants and refugees, there is no conclusive medical data showing disproportionate numbers of Somali children with autism in Minneapolis.

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MINNPOST.WORLD

A whiff of relief or a reason to wince?

By SUSAN ALBRIGHT

“Help is on the way” may have been the headline Wednesday after House passage of a mammoth, wide-ranging housing bill, but it didn’t take much reading between the lines to see that a need for “confidence and stability,” not unanimous government largesse, were the operable reasons for its bipartisan support and presidential acquiescence.

With taxpayer money potentially headed for both strapped homeowners and struggling mortgage-granting giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, this wasn’t anyone’s idea of ideal legislation. In fact, Republicans threatened to filibuster and President Bush signaled a veto before lending his support earlier Wednesday. Yet as it heads to the Senate for consideration, passage was pretty universally greeted as necessary.

“Critics find much to dislike about the multi-pronged plan,” CNNMoney reported. “They argue, for example, that the bill gives ‘a blank check’ to the Treasury to spend on helping Fannie and Freddie, despite assurances from Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Democratic leaders that the authority granted Treasury by the bill is unlikely to be used.

“Supporters note that while no one likes every provision in the bill, the housing crisis and market instability demand action. ‘This isn’t a perfect solution by any means,’ said Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., chairman of the House Financial Services Committee. But, he added, it enjoys support from a broad and unlikely coalition, including bankers, housing advocates and governors and mayors struggling with the foreclosure crisis.”

Some homeowners could refinance

BBC News described the package’s main features: “Under the rescue plan, hundreds of thousands of homeowners trapped in mortgages they cannot afford on homes that have fallen in value would be able to refinance their mortgages with more affordable,

fixed-rate loans backed by the Federal Housing Administration.

“The bill would set up the first national licensing system for mortgage brokers and other loan officers. It also includes a tax break of as much as \$7,500 for first time home buyers, as well as help for troubled mortgage finance providers Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.”

It also includes nearly \$4 billion in funding to help local government entities buy up and repair foreclosed properties for resale; this is one of the provisions that earlier had caused President Bush to threaten a veto. With his change of heart, widely credited to the persuasion of Paulson, the package may well pass the Senate by week’s end.

“The positive aspects of the bill are needed now to increase confidence and stability in the housing and financial markets,” White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said Wednesday, explaining Bush’s reversal.

Swift, positive reactions

Reactions to the deal – both verbal and in the form of trading on Wall Street – were quick.

“This is about not only our housing markets, but it’s about our capital markets more broadly,” Paulson said in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

“This goes well beyond the two institutions, Fannie and Freddie; it has to do with investors in the United States and investors all over the world.”

Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac “extended their weeklong recovery after U.S. lawmakers reached a deal on legislation that authorizes Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson to bail out the mortgage-finance providers while placing few restrictions on the companies,” wrote Bryan Keogh and Dawn Kopecki at Bloomberg.com.

“Fannie Mae rose 12 percent and Freddie Mac added 11 percent in New York Stock Exchange composite trading. Their market values have more than doubled since July 15 after plummeting on concern the companies may not have enough capital to withstand the highest mortgage delinquency

rates in at least three decades.”

Benefits to shareholders

Bloomberg’s report explained that “shareholders and the companies benefit because the bill doesn’t require Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac to cut or eliminate dividends if they take federal aid, giving that discretion to the Treasury. It also doesn’t automatically give the Treasury preferential treatment over other shareholders if it buys the companies’ preferred shares. The government also can’t compel the government-sponsored enterprises to issue securities or buy common stock.”

Paul Miller, an analyst with Friedman Billings Ramsey & Co., told Bloomberg the two so-called GSEs (government-sponsored enterprises) got what they wanted. “They got a big backstop and they got language that the Treasury doesn’t necessarily have to stop them from paying dividends or cap compensation. That’s why the stocks are ripping.”

As for some 400,000 at-risk homeowners who can’t afford their mortgages, Les Christie at CNNMoney.com explained how the bill will help them refinance:

“Qualified borrowers must live in their homes and have loans that were issued between January 2005 and June 2007. Additionally, they must be spending at least 40% of their gross monthly income on all household debt to be eligible for the program. They can be up to date on their existing mortgage or in default, but either way borrowers must prove that they will not be able to keep paying their existing mortgage – and attest that they are not deliberately defaulting just to obtain lower payments.

“Before homeowners can get FHA-backed mortgages, they must first retire any other debt on the home, such as a home equity loan or line of credit. Borrowers are not permitted to take out another home equity loan for at least five years, unless it’s to pay for necessary upkeep on the home. To get a new home equity loan, borrowers will need approval from the FHA, and total debt cannot ex-

ceed 95% of the home’s appraised value at the time.”

“Borrowers can contact their current mortgage servicer or go directly to an FHA-approved lender for help. These lenders can be found on the website of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.”

The scope of the problem

CNNMoney’s report explained that over the past year, “housing prices have fallen more than 15% nationwide, according to the S&P/Case-Shiller Home Price Index. More than 340,000 have had their homes repossessed by banks during the first six months of the year, up 136% from the same period in 2007. The number of delinquent mortgage holders during the same period has risen to 1.4 million, up 56% from a year earlier.

“‘Enactment of the bill is too politically important to both parties for either side to let the legislation die,’ said Jaret Seiberg, a financial services analyst for the Stanford Group, a Washington policy research firm.”

That’s despite the wince factor, laid out by Brian Wingfield of Forbes.com:

“Here’s who the bill won’t help: taxpayers. They’re now on the hook for as much as \$25 billion to rescue Fannie and Freddie, should the Treasury need to throw the mortgage buyers a lifeline, according to the Congressional Budget Office. (However, the CBO also estimates that there’s a greater than 50% chance that this won’t be necessary.) ...

“The nearly 700-page bill has some awfully big-government provisions. It increases the federal debt limit by \$800 billion to \$10.6 trillion. It gives first-time homebuyers a tax credit of up to \$7,500 (which must be paid back to Uncle Sam). It sets aside \$180 million in federal grants to counsel borrowers on the foreclosure process. And it creates a national licensing and registration system for loan originators.”

Read the complete story at www.minnpost.com.

Brave New Workshop feasts its comic chops on election

CHRISTY DESMITH

When the Brave New Workshop this Friday premieres its 2008 election show — with its characteristically long title, “The Lion, The Witch, and the War Hero; Or Is McCain Able?” — the troupe will engage, as usual, in equal-opportunity skewering.

Targets of their biting satire include Hillary Rodham Clinton, John McCain, Barack Obama, Norm Coleman and former Gov. Jesse Ventura. Even Brave New Workshop alumnus Al Franken is fair game.

Although some in the community have assumed that the workshop leans left, situated as it is in the historically progressive Uptown neighborhood of South Minneapolis, artistic director Caleb McEwan insists that the nation’s oldest sketch comedy and improvisational theater borrows its material from headlines — not party lines.

“We certainly don’t espouse a particular viewpoint,” said McEwan of the workshop, now in its 50th anniversary season. “When [Bill] Clinton was in office, we were making fun of Clinton all the time and everyone was like, why don’t you make fun of the Republicans?”

But of course, in recent years, the workshop has had a grand old time doing just that, blasting the Bush administration in such rip-roaring shows as “Bushwhacked II” and “Electile Dysfunction; Or Two Johns, a Dick, and a Bush.”

“The Lion, the Witch, and the War Hero; or Is McCain Able?”

- July 25-Nov. 8
- Brave New Workshop, 2605 Hennepin Ave. S., Minneapolis
- \$23-\$25; (612) 332-6620

Anyone in power is a moving target

“Everything swings back and forth,” said McEwan. “Basically, you take what you’re given when it comes to satire. ... A lot of it is dictated by who’s in power, who’s doing something.”

Still, he said, there is a special opportunity when the show focuses on a presidential election: Audience members are all fairly knowledgeable about the issues, and there are multiple players who all have stellar name-recognition and familiar personal mannerisms. In the past, said McEwan, the workshop has encountered roadblocks in its attempts to satirize midterm elections. In fact, in 2006, the smarty-pants troupe ran into trouble: The audience hadn’t yet heard of Nancy Pelosi; nobody was catching all the jokes about the Speaker of the House.

As for this new show, most reasonably informed folk will easily follow along as Hillary Clinton gets clobbered for her tearful refusals to drop out of the presidential race. An emotional but under-informed



Courtesy of Brave New Workshop

Beyond the skeleton, the cast from left: Josh Eakright, Lauren Anderson, Mike Fotis, Ellie Hino, Joe Bozic and Bobby Gardner.

Obama supporter gets raked over the coals. McCain, too, has proved to be a rich source of material; he gets ribbed for, among other things, proposing that the U.S. build a missile defense system in Czechoslovakia, a country that hasn’t existed since 1992.

Then, of course, there’s the delicate issue of his age, McEwan says. “We have a line in the show [that] ‘A vote for McCain is just putting his vice president on layaway.’”

Candidates for U.S. Senate, incumbent Norm Coleman and Al Franken, also make cameo appearances — but their spotlight is stolen when Jesse Ventura appears and challenges them to wrestle.

It’s all in good sport — and it doesn’t seem to be offending people. Rather, McEwan

said, he finds that sensitive and passionate voters simply use the workshop’s material to reinforce existing beliefs.

“For instance, in this show we have a young man singing about Barack Obama. He’s talking about all the amazing things Obama can do and it gets to the point where it gets incredibly exaggerated — he can fly, he has laser vision.”

Of course, the troupe intended this skit as an indictment of ardent Obama supporters who don’t know the issues. But so far, during the previews, said McEwan, “A lot of people are taking away from it that Obama is perfect.”

MinnPost inPrint

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

Autism and Minneapolis' Somali children

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The Minnesota Department of Health is scrambling to put together a "pre-pilot program" to assess autism in the general population. It has not developed a plan to assess numbers of immigrant children with autism, in part because of laws restricting access to school data.

In the meantime, there is concern in Minneapolis public schools.

The Minnesota Health Department estimates 1 percent of Minnesota's children have autism. But the Minnesota Department of Education said that in the Minneapolis' early childhood and kindergarten programs, more than 12 percent of the students with autism reported speaking Somali at home. According to Minneapolis school officials, more than 17 percent of the children in the district's early childhood special education autism program are Somali speaking.

Almost 6 percent of the district's total enrollment is made up of Somali-speaking students, and about 6 percent of the children in the district's overall early childhood and kindergarten special education programs are Somali.

About a quarter of all autism children who attend autism classrooms for students functioning too low to be mainstreamed in regular schoolrooms are Somali. Special education specialists said that indicates that the degree of autism Somali children are developing is on the severe end of the autism spectrum.

"I'm not seeing Aspergers syndrome and the full spectrum of autism in Somali children. It is the more classic forms of autism in general; it is the more severe forms of autism that we're seeing in our Somali babies that are born here," said Anne Harrington, early childhood special education coordinator for the Minneapolis district and a spe-

cialist on the topic.

"If they're having more children, many of the siblings also have autism. We have a number of [Somali] families who have two children on the autism spectrum and sometimes more. I've been working to get somebody to look at this and pay attention because it feels like this is too specific [to Somalis]. It's got to be preventable," Harrington said.

She said she knows of an apartment building with Somali residents in which almost every family has at least one autistic child.

A huge issue

Harrington said the Somali community is struggling to understand and recognize autism. She said that among Somali families there has been a lot of shame and confusion associated with having an autistic child. But that's changing. "They're beginning to be aware that this is a huge issue in their community, and they're starting to come together and not isolate themselves," she said.

According to a 2001 state health department study, there are an estimated 15,000 to 40,000 Somalis living in Minnesota, the biggest Somali population outside of East Africa. The state estimates that 67 percent of refugees who arrived in 2000, when Minnesota saw the biggest surge of Somali refugees, settled in Hennepin County. And nearly a third of all students who speak Somali at home in Minnesota attend Minneapolis public schools.

Harrington suggested that differences in the genetic make-up of Africans put them more at risk for developing autism than other immigrant groups, and noted that refugee women and children must undergo numerous immunizations.

(According to school data, the percentage of Hmong children and Latino children in Minneapolis public schools with autism

is not as high as Somali children with autism.)

Harrington raised issues that are part of a long-standing debate over whether immunizations are linked to autism.

"They're given more [vaccines] than we get, and sometimes they're doubled up," Harrington said. "Then their children are given immunizations. In Somalia, their generations have not received these immunizations, and then suddenly they're getting just a wallop of them in the moms and then in the babies. That's certainly a concern that's been expressed to me by the Somali population."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends that refugee adults receive at least 10 vaccines.

But numerous studies have failed to prove any connection with symptoms of autism in children and vaccines.

"Research has not shown it's related to shots or toxins — kids who haven't received immunizations have the same baseline [for autism] as those who have," said HCMC's Maroushek.

Study in Sweden

There are some studies, however, that link autism and ancestry.

A Swedish newspaper published an article last week about that country's Somali population and its high prevalence of autism. The story described an autism study that focused on Somalis. Doctors hypothesized that the high rates of autism in Somali children born in Sweden is due to the lower levels of sunlight and vitamin D immigrants get in Sweden compared with Somalia, a country near the equator. Dark skin that's covered up and a diet that doesn't include fatty fish limits absorption of vitamin D as well, according to the doctors.

And the journal *Science* published a study last week that

linked shared ancestry to autism. (The study was also described in the *Times of London*.) A Harvard team funded by the National Institute of Mental Health studied Middle Eastern families in which cousins had married each other. In five of those cases, children showed genetic defects linked to autism. Many Muslim Somalis marry their first, second or third cousins, putting them a category suspected to be more at risk.

Struggle to find care

While experts are baffled by the causes of autism in U.S.-born Somali children, autism advocates say that the problem is compounded because Somali families struggle to find health services.

According to Huda Farah, a Somali advocate who collaborates with the health department and trains childcare providers who work with autistic Somali children, language barriers and a lack of understanding of the complex U.S. medical system are key reasons why many Somali parents don't seek medical help for their autistic children.

Cultural barriers also impede: Unlike in the United States, children in Somalia aren't taken to a doctor for developmental disorders.

Because Somali parents aren't seeking medical help for their autistic children, it's usually teachers who identify and track autism among those children, according to the Autism Society of America. Schools, however, do not make a formal autism diagnosis, but rather look to see if a child meets educational criteria to be placed in autism programs. Nor do Minneapolis schools to refer children with autism to medical doctors.

Elizabeth Gorman is a freelance journalist in Minneapolis. She also works at Minneapolis Public Schools as a Spanish bilingual educator.

THE DAILY GLEAN

Ford's St. Paul Ranger once again escapes danger

By DAVID BRAUER

A huge win for St. Paul: Ford announced this morning that its local plant will stay open until 2011, a two-year extension, AP's Tom Krisher reports. KARE says the plant still employs over 1,000 people, and Joe Kimball has St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman's statement here.

Aaron Foster, the Corky Finney pal accused of the 1981 murder of Bobbi Winn, was exonerated by a Ramsey County jury. Former St. Paul Police Chief Finney's mortal enemy, County Sheriff Bob Fletcher, reopened the case in 2006. "He's going to murder another woman," one outraged Winn family member cried out in court, according to the PiPress's Emily Gurnon. Fox9's Tom Lyden captures the emotions and gets a defense f-bomb. The Strib's Pat Pheifer says medical examiners couldn't determine a death cause and evidence was excluded.

The Strib's David Chanan follows up on his Minneapolis-police-discrimination scoop by asking, via frequent department antagonist Ron Edwards, whether Police Chief Tim Dolan and Civil Rights Department head Michael Jordan deserve their jobs. After all, their actions just cost the city \$2 mil, the second-largest police-related settlement in city history. City officials talk around the question. Then again: MPR's Brandt Williams terms the settlement agreement only "possible," as the city is still meeting with its attorneys.

TCF Bank second-quarter profits fell 62 percent as loan non-payments rose, the Strib's Mike Meyers reports. The number seems tiny — 0.9 percent of all consumer loans — but Meyers says that's up almost 50 percent from the previous quarter and double last year's pace. The bank charged off 1.7 percent of commercial loans, triple the previous year's rate. Analysts say the bank is well run and doesn't need to raise capital.

Although some commentators mock the Coleman campaign's cringing "juicy porn" invocation in its most recent TV ad, the Strib headline spins it as "geniality" (jocularity, maybe). Why we need two dailies: The PiPress says the ad "goes for the jugular." The PiPress' Rachel Stassen-Berger writes that "the ad skirts the truth." The ad claims Franken didn't pay taxes when he paid them to the wrong states, and employees never went "without" insurance, though Franken didn't pay workers' comp bills.

Pro-business forces bought a full-page color ad on a Strib section front and PiPress back page to hit Al Franken over the union-card check issue. The ad repeats the falsehood about "eliminating the right to private votes" to unionize; Franken-supported legislation does strip management's power to insist on a secret ballot over a more public card check-off. Sincere question: Without management's insistence, would a secret ballot ever be used? Thoughts welcome in comments.

More Senate: A Rasmussen poll has Coleman up just 1 percentage point, 44-43 over Franken; Franken was ahead when leaners were counted. This poll has consistently pegged the race tighter than any other. No Independence Party candidate was included. The same polls has Obama up 12 over McCain in the state.

Hey d'ya hear Tim Pawlenty might be veep? The Strib's Patricia Lopez writes that "national pundits worked themselves into a frenzy" over an off-hand positive McCain comment, but the distance is ironic: Strib editors put this one on the front page. The summer parlor game's news, if any, is that Pawlenty now refuses to answer veep questions, which probably means McCain is vetting him — or that Jesse Ventura's week-old record for higher-office coyness has already

been eclipsed.

More Veep: Right on cue, McCain says this morning that no running-mate decision has been made, MPR's Tom Scheck notes.

At the Strib's Big Question blog, Kevin Diaz notes Michele Bachmann's aircraft never touched down at the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge during her "Drill Here" tour. The problem: fog. Still, the congresswoman saw what she wanted to see.

A Republican-convention protest group says it will bust its permit and engage in civil disobedience on the meeting's last day, the PiPress' Dave Orrick reports. The Anti-War Committee says it won't get violent, but will try to get attention as John McCain is accepting the nomination. By the way, the paper's Rachel Stassen-Berger says President Bush will gain maximum separation by speaking on the first day.

KSTP's Tim Sherno notes that there will be a protest-related defendant surge just as the state slashed public defender budgets. Ramsey County, which has lost 12 positions, could be overwhelmed. The system is already stressed; and one Greater Minnesota defendant faced a judge without counsel, a newly laid-off p.d. says. Via MPR's Bob Collins, the Worthington Globe's Julie Buntjer says state-shucked costs are already being pushed back on counties.

A Strib editorial comes out for lifting state salary caps for high-ranking local government employees, to retain top talent. They're not necessarily for higher taxes; localities "will have to balance their budgets and answer to taxpayers and voters."

Using a new law, the state busted Bemidji and Byron, Minn., pharmacies for recklessly filing online prescriptions. The Strib's Mary Lynn Smith credits the family of a victim who over-

dosed on Bemidji pills for the legislation's passage. Minnesota's law penalizes pharmacists for filling prescriptions via online questionnaire. The pharmacies filled 3,100 and 4,500 prescriptions this way.

The Strib's Liz Fedor quotes Northwest Airlines head Doug Steenland saying the Delta merger will close by year's end. NWA stock soared 15 percent as oil prices fell, even though the airline lost \$377 million in the second quarter. The PiPress' John Welbes says schedule cuts begin Aug. 19 "as the summer travel season is winding down." No cities will completely lose service, though circumstances could deepen cuts.

Corn prices, once over \$8 a bushel, now stand at \$5.50, the PiPress' Tom Webb notes. Good weather, oil's short-term slide and improving exchange rates are credited.

Bummer: Minneapolis's Peace Corps office will close, just weeks after they moved into new digs, the Strib's Emily Kaiser reports. The move helps save the cash-strapped Corps \$1.5 million; the organization faces an \$8.7 million deficit because of the weakening dollar. Local pols decry the move, but Dems just approved the president's Corps budget.

Strib newsroom troops ratified their concession-laden, three-year labor deal by a 210-27 vote; Mpls.St.Paul's Brian Lambert was working late and has the details.

Nort spews: The Twins will happily see Yankee Stadium blown up after being swept there; the 5-1 loss puts Minnesota two-and-a-half games back of Chicago, and just three ahead of the Tigers. Minnesota happily returns to the A.L. Central and a visit to Cleveland. Minnesota has ruled its division, but the Tribe is 7-3 in its last 10.

COMMUNITY VOICES

The Independence Party – the party of what might have been

By Dave Mindeman

Jesse decided not to run for U.S. Senate. Good or bad, I don't know. But the flurry of activity that surrounded filings at the secretary of state's office for the Independence Party's Senate nominee prompts a question.

Is there a reason for the Independence Party to exist?

Under the liberal tenets of the State of Minnesota, the Independence Party still has "major" party status. But does it deserve it? Boy, that's questionable.

The party (under the Reform Party moniker at the time) rocketed to fame on the coattails of Jesse Ventura's surprise win for governor in 1998. The euphoria for the party was unquenchable. But what has happened since is a classic study in wasted and trashed political capital.

The Independence Party (as it was called later) had an opportunity afforded to few other third-party structures. It had a newsworthy standard-bearer, it had national attention, and it had the opportunity for party building. All the things that a political party dreams of getting, and they had acquired it in a short span of time. Maybe that's why it all fell apart.

The standard-bearer

As a standard-bearer, Jesse Ventura could simply walk into a room and make news. He was a lightning rod. And even though he was controversial, the Independence Party had someone who could, at the very least, command attention. But, Jesse didn't transfer his fame to his party. He enjoyed the limelight a little too much and was probably a bit too

conceited to allow others in the third-party movement to share in his success.

It became clear that Jesse's focus was Jesse alone. He didn't help the party raise money. He didn't help recruit candidates, nor did he support the ones who ran under the IP label.

And, the party lacked strong leadership to build on that sudden success. Most of the people responsible for Jesse's successful campaign (Dean Barkley, et al.), joined the government and left the party to fend for itself. They preferred the short-term view of government influence rather than any long term view of building a viable party.

National attention

The nation was stunned in 1998. Jesse really did shock the world. He basked in the limelight, getting national interviews and an infinite number of requests for meetings with reporters. But Ventura kept the focus on what he did. The party received none of the recognition. Nobody looked beneath the surface to see if there was a viable party mechanism under the bluster.

In reality, there wasn't. But the opportunity to build something was certainly there, and it was lost in Jesse's aura. Ventura is certainly mostly to blame for that, but there were no party builders willing to shoulder the load and construct a state wide apparatus either. The success was too sudden and swift, and, as it turned out, very fleeting.

Opportunities squandered

With the success of Jesse Ventura, there should have been

efforts to build party units at the local levels. There were token structures, but they were left isolated and unsupported. Enthusiastic candidates received no help and were left on their own, financially and structurally.

The biggest opportunity would have been 2000. Ventura needed to be engaged to help his party pick up legislative seats. It not only was needed to strengthen the party, but Ventura needed the help legislatively. He had no caucus to guide legislation — not even one person. But Ventura remained disengaged from the party and preferred the combative approach, dealing with the Legislature directly from the executive office, rather than any negotiation within the chambers. It was a fatal political tactic — for Jesse and for the party itself.

Other opportunities were presented during the critical tenure of Ventura's governorship. Bob Lessard became an independent legislator in 2000, but he never seemed to develop any relationship with Ventura or the party, and retired shortly thereafter. Sheila Kiscaden turned to the Independence Party toward the end of Ventura's term in 2002. She won her election with little help from the party and ended up caucusing with the Republicans. Later, she turned Democrat before her retirement. Her flirtation with the Independence Party was a blip on the radar.

Seeking out sitting members of the Legislature like Lessard or Kiscaden would have given the party some leadership — something to build on. But the party never cultivated those opportuni-

ties, and their attempts to groom candidates were feeble at best.

Still in a state of disarray

That brings us to today. The Independence Party is still in a state of disarray, looking for another personality to fill the Jesse void. There are now seven candidates for the U.S. Senate nomination. Seven! That is not an indication of party popularity. No, that is more an indication of a party with no plan — or a pathway to one. Dean Barkley is running because Jesse Ventura is not. Jack Uldrich (a party founder) wants to somehow get the 5 percent needed in the Senate election to maintain major party status. Stephen Williams is their endorsed candidate (if that has any meaning). Doug Williams ran as a congressional candidate in the Second District but must want a higher profile (such as it is). And as for Doug Stanton, Kurt Anderson, and Bill Dahn — who knows?

Is everything simply ego in this party? Probably. Does anybody want to put a structure together? It is doubtful.

This party had an opportunity. It had a brief moment in time when it could have started a viable movement. Minnesota is a state that is known to support the unusual, to help candidates that fit outside the box.

But that isn't going to happen with the Independence Party. It has lost the spark and is now just blowing smoke.

Dave Mindeman is a community activist from Apple Valley and is the lead blogger for mnpACT!.

Want to add your voice?

If you're interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.