

Los Angeles 1, Amherst 0

Last month Christopher Thompson, of Los Angeles, was sentenced to five years in prison for assault with a deadly weapon. His offense: He stopped his car short in front of two cyclists who then crashed into his vehicle. One cyclist hit the rear window, broke his front teeth and nose, and suffered cuts to his face. The other separated his shoulder. Thompson, an emergency room doctor, said he braked so that he could take a photo of the cyclists. The judge didn't buy it.

In Amherst, we had our own car-cyclist accident followed by a creative alibi. Parvin Niroomand, 75, crossed the center line on University Drive and killed cyclist Misti Bassi, 33. Bassi was thrown into the car's windshield so hard she cracked it. Niroomand paused briefly,

then drove away. She explained her getaway with a story that rivals Sen. Larry Craig's "wide stance" alibi for his airport toilet bust. Niroomand mistook Bassi for a tree.

Judge Laurie MacLeod, of Eastern Hampshire District Court, and Assistant District Attorney Melissa Doran evidently bought the story, and cooked up a bizarre deal that spared Niroomand any jail time.

So when did those wacky Los

Angelinos start caring about cyclists? L.A. is the epicenter of the car culture, where anything with a motor and wheels is respected more than something with a heart and feet. The cyclists involved were hardly innocent. They were blocking traffic by riding two abreast, and were part of a racing club that often commandeered the road, riding en masse and running red lights. They had also flipped off Thompson.

But fellow cyclists — from as far away as Europe and China — wrote letters to the editor and filed 270 emails and letters with the court condemning Dr. Thompson. Many stressed the vulnerability of cyclists to vehicles weighing thousands of pounds. Vulnerability was one of the reasons cited by the judge for the harsh sentence.

Here in Amherst, turns out, it went the other way. Those in the cycling community, of which I am now embarrassed to be a member, were caught napping. I, for one, assumed that in a town where human values are allegedly paramount, the killed would draw more sympathy than the killer. In this vacuum created by cyclist silence, the other side struck decisively.

Alan Root, in a letter to the Bulletin, wrote about the real victim, "the driver, a caring individual whose long and generous service to our community is now haunted by this catastrophic event." He conceded that Bassi's death was also a tragedy, but was quick to point out that she was not riding "on the adjacent safe bike path." (Translation: It was her own fault.) In another letter, Am-

herst Selectman Aaron Hayden led with the tragedy of Bassi's death, but then went through a litany of dangerous behaviors cyclists should avoid.

The implication was that cyclists, including Bassi, are responsible for their own safety, though none of his safety tips would have saved Bassi's life.

In an October news article about how awful cyclists are who don't wear helmets, referred to the Bassi fatality, as if there was some relevance.

The reporter admitted he had no idea whether Bassi was wearing a helmet (riding helmetless is legal), but the seed was planted, and the buzz in the senior community (of which I am now embarrassed to be a member) was about how Bassi wore no helmet (i.e., deserved to die). In the wake of the ac-

cident, Amherst police vowed to crack down on cyclists.

The stage was set for the court decision, in essence, to set Niroomand free, with community service in lieu of prison. When it came, the local press published a nice photograph of Niroomand, apparently cooking up some tasty dish, possibly for a good cause.

There is no word on whether Bassi cooked. There was no photo of her. She may have been an anti-cooking terrorist, for all we know.

Judge MacLeod said that Niroomand "will suffer with her grief for the rest of her life."

Misti Bassi, on the other hand, no longer has a life. *Dick Teresi is a freelance writer who lives in Amherst.*

LETTERS

Contract 'give-backs' appall

To the Bulletin:

I am not a member of a union, I am not employed by the Amherst school system, and neither is anyone in my family. I have one child who graduated from the school system and another in the high school. I am a property owner in Amherst. And, I am appalled at what I hear are calls to break the teacher contract that was signed several years ago and is still in effect.

Several provisions in the contract have recently come under increasing scrutiny for their cost. I believe that this increased scrutiny should be a basis for reconsidering those provisions — and possibly rejecting or modifying them — in future contracts (in 2011). But the current attacks on this agreed-upon contract seem to subvert the collective bargaining process. The calls to shame, guilt or oblige the teachers and their union to "give-back" agreed upon salary increases reflect poorly on our town. Efforts to make teacher give-backs conditions upon which some voters will support an override seem like voter blackmail.

Here are some points to consider: The contract was not done in secret. Its provisions for salaries and authority over the high school schedule have been well known. These may be provisions that the town now rejects, but the nature of contracts means we have to wait our turn to negate them.

The history of the salary issue is salient. I understand the teachers have graciously given the union the authority to negotiate "give backs." I am grateful for this and hope that some resolution can be found that helps the town, without hurting these teachers' quality of life or retirement planning. After all, just a few years ago, these are the same increases that were given as legitimate payback for when the teachers generously agreed to forego past raises — at another bad economic time — to help the town.

For a town that prides itself as progressive in action and in thought and expresses its strong commitment to social justice, how can we justify attacking and undermining the collective bargaining process with our own teachers?

How ironic that the lesson our kids may learn from today's challenges is that your word means everything, unless there's an economic crisis, and then your promises can be broken. I hope not.

Mindy Domb
Amherst

An active voice in the schools

To the Bulletin:

I teach English at ARHS, and I love a teachable moment. To my students: Steve Rivkin and Catherine Sanderson provide a real-life example of both the power and the weakness of the passive voice. Sanderson and Rivkin have decided to stop writing their monthly column due to the "the personal nature of many responses to [their] writings."

Emily Gold Boutillier recently wrote as well about the "personal nature of the attacks on their writings." I question

the truth of both of these statements, for I have re-read all of the responses and found nothing I would deem an attack, let alone one of a personal nature.

Rivkin and Sanderson reported these "attacks" in their Jan. 8 column: "Those who question the merits of an unprecedented required ninth-grade science curriculum, our unique approach to differentiated instruction, or the lack of challenge in particular subjects and grades are branded elitist; those who question the grouping of children into elementary schools on the basis of language spoken at home or ethnicity are called racist; those who question the merits of the trimester system, the desirability of reform mathematics in the elementary school, or the intellectual content of the middle school curriculum are deemed anti-teacher."

This statement exemplifies the power of the passive voice (they employ it three times): Rivkin and Sanderson can assert that they have been attacked without ever proving these attacks, and some people will take their assertion as truth.

However, as I aim to teach my students to be critical thinkers rather than mere receptacles, I would ask my students to look further. Sanderson and Rivkin have never told us who these nameless attackers are, and thus, they put a stop to all dialogue. In the responses to their columns, my colleagues defended the practices and curricula that Rivkin and Sanderson had questioned. In other words, they responded to the questioning with answers and with invitations to extend the conversation about education.

We educators love to talk about education; we are even quite often geeky (my students know this word is a high compliment in my proverbial book) about it, as last week, when one of my colleagues and I had a great discussion in the hallway about the placement of the thesis statement in an introductory paragraph (must it always be at the end of the paragraph?). Ask me about teaching "Contemporary Literature" and "Creative Writing," and you might regret

it, as you will hear me blather on and on about my love for reading, for writing and for teaching. Most important, you will hear me rave about my students, who astound me daily. I have the best job in the world, and I will defend it loudly because my students deserve no less. Perhaps Sanderson, Rivkin and Boutillier interpreted my colleagues' loud defenses as attacks. I read their responses differently: passionate answers to criticism and questions.

In the end, the use of passive voice does a disservice to the public, for it allows Rivkin and Sanderson to avoid addressing the pedagogical concerns that my colleagues explored. I can state, "I have been attacked!" as long as I want, but if I want a critical dialogue about pedagogy and curricula, I need to do more than hide behind the passive voice, which in the end, bespeaks weakness not power.

Malia Hwang-Carlos
Leverett

Writer to Bulletin: 'Yer yella'

To the Bulletin:

The Bulletin's front-page story on Feb. 19 about Superintendent Rodriguez is excessive. The Regional School Committee negotiated contract terms with Dr. Rodriguez in 2009, and as the story suggests, he is performing in conformance with that contract. Further, as anyone familiar with the role of superintendent will confirm, whether or not physically located in his offices, he is on the job continually. What professional in today's economy doesn't take work home?

Clearly the Bulletin is pushing the limits of propriety in its article. If the paper has concerns about Dr. Rodriguez's performance as measured by what he is getting done, that is legitimate fodder for an expose. But they need to show us the data. Anything else is simply our local example of yellow journalism. The man's medical history is private. Period.

Attendance records are best left to elementary school classrooms.

Michael Aronson
Amherst

A split-screen view of education

By POLLY INGRAHAM

At the same time that Amherst residents are worried about the possibility of devastating cuts to our schools, a new Massachusetts education reform bill is being hailed as ushering in a new and brighter era for public education. It now seems likely that our state will qualify for the coveted "Race to the Top" funds-as much as \$250 million-offered by the U.S. Department of Education. When and if this money arrives, though, it will be directed largely to the "underperforming" schools in the state. Legislators in Boston are talking with excitement.

I feel as these days I am living a life right smack in "the achievement gap." I have two children at Amherst Regional High School and one at a local elementary school, and I teach in an urban high school an hour's drive away. I consider myself fortunate to have access to a kind of a split-screen view: I can hardly think about the issues of one place without putting them side-by-side with the issues of the other.

My school doesn't have a sign outside that identifies it as "underperforming." There is, though, a general awareness that we are collectively not where we need to be by almost any measure of academic success: grades, MCAS scores, attendance rates, dropout rates, graduation rates. We face daunting challenges, and what

is working against us — mostly brought in from the streets — is formidable.

And yet our students present the same spectrum as they do anywhere else: high-achieving students who are in our International Baccalaureate Program, students who persist against all odds (not having a stable place to live, for instance) to strive for achievement, and also plenty of "regular" students with solid family support who do the best they can. Stereotypes about urban youth disappear quickly when you become an "insider" at my school; we simply see that we need to try to meet every individual student where he or she is and aim for progress.

Where I teach, 80 percent of our students qualify for reduced lunch (26 percent receive special education services and 11 percent are limited English proficient). This is not to say that effective teaching is not possible or that wealthier districts don't have their share of challenges, too.

But I need to address this kind of frustration, voiced by a student just transplanted from New York City: "Miss, Julius Caesar" doesn't pay my bills!" At age 18 and still in the 10th grade, with many family members in gangs, he doesn't see how reading Shakespeare will send him on his way to success. During the one-on-one conversation we had, I felt as if I needed to summon everything I really understood about the value of an education and give it to him

straight. When my students hear the word "suburbs" (it's actually in "Julius Caesar") they think of rich people with lawns, places where kids do homework every night because it's expected of them there. When a representative from my college comes to do an information session at our school, a group of students with good grades gather to listen, but there's generally no follow-up: This institution is too distant from their lives.

By chance, I discovered last year that there is a young man at my school who has the exact same birthday as my own son. Both are seniors this year, both athletes. This young man has a fabulous smile and an easy-going demeanor. He hasn't been able to get his license yet because it costs too much, he is looking for work, and he is hoping to join the Army soon. Meanwhile, my son and most of his friends wait to hear from a group of selective colleges.

So the split screen view continues for me. I will hope for two things: that our fine Amherst schools will withstand whatever lies ahead and maintain their level of quality, and that hundreds of other schools in other places will get the help they need to enable their students to reach high, too.

Polly Ingraham has managed an internship program and is currently teaching English at a public high school in Springfield. She lives in Shutesbury with her husband and three children.

CORRECTIONS

Due to a technical problem, Bulletin Board listing for a 2009 performance of "Hair" by Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School presents musical was accidentally reprinted in last week's Bulletin and on www.amherstbulletin.com. The show was not performed this Monday.

Last week's front-page story on an urgent care facility planned for University Drive should have stated clearly that no employees will be added to Cooley Dickinson Hospital's payroll, and that an on-site sleep lab and an obstetrics office are existing, separate entities from the pending urgent care clinic.

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