

Never wanting the busy day to come to an end

Have you ever had a day you didn't want to end?

Saturday was that kind of a day for me. It was warm, but not too warm. It was breezy, but not too breezy. It was dry, but not too dry. We ate breakfast on the veranda. Actually, it's just our front porch, but I like to say, "veranda." It sounds more hospitable.

With a promise to wash dishes later, I started my day by putting on my straw cowboy hat and climbing on my mower. Jim had just repaired my zero-turning radius mower and I happily sped and spun around the yard, lowering the vegetation a good three inches.

Whoa, I need to back up here because the first thing I do every day is start watering. I turn the faucet on, ever so slightly, and let the water trickle. A couple hours on the flowers, a couple hours on the garden, a couple hours on that bare spot in the grass. In a days time, everything gets a drink and, in my way of thinking at least, it's not wasted water. It has time to really soak in.

After mowing I headed across the street to our rental house to prune some wayward shrubs. This was a job I had put off for a year. But once I got started, something happened to me. I took on a new persona and became "The Mad Whacker." If I didn't recognize it, I cut it off. Down to the ground. Wading into a bush that was mostly dead, guess what I found? Hidden in amongst the brittle, dusty brush was a little plastic, pink flamingo with the hinged wings that rotate in the wind.

I had to laugh because Jim has always teased me with pink flamingos. He knows I think they're kind of "tacky," so those are exactly what show up in my yard from time to time. He is especially fond of the inflatable ones. Mainly because they top the list in tackiness.

But back to my little pink friend. Since he must have belonged to the sweet lady who had lived there before we bought the house, I stuck his metal stand into the dirt of a barrel planter in the yard. Maybe he'll stay there, if the new tenants don't mind. If not, I may actually let him live in my flower garden, hidden from sight, of course, and known only to me.

With everything cut down that could be at the rental house, I headed back to our house where I had spotted some low-hanging branches on our cottonwood tree. Snip, snip. Gone. Then Jim got in on the act, borrowing my nippers to whittle down some cedar tree branches.

When I looked back in my wake, there was brush and branches everywhere I had been.

Since I have my own little garden wagon, I hooked it up to the four-wheeler and made the circuit loading

Out Back Carolyn Plotts



up all the brush to haul to the burn-pit located on the edge of town. I had just pulled up to the edge of the pit and was bending over the wagon to start unloading when a gust of wind caught my hat and blew it into the pit. My first reaction was, "Oh, no. I hope no one sees my hair." Because you can imagine a day of working and sweating with a hat clamped down on your head, how your hair would look. A quick look around assured me no one had seen. So I quickly unloaded the brush and headed home.

Coming to the railroad tracks, the four-wheeler began to sputter and jerk finally coming to a halt on the tracks. I checked the gas tank. Dry as a bone. Train traffic has ended to our little town, but I pushed it off the tracks anyway. Just then a lady from the country was coming into town and offered me a ride. Which I accepted, apologizing for my awful "hat hair" all the way.

I located several curtain rods and all hooked together, they made a great hook to retrieve my hat. Jim drove me, a can of gas and my "hat hooker" to the burn pit. It was more important to me to get the hat back on my head to hide my hair than it was to get the four-wheeler running.

Home again, I was able to tackle the next job. Weed-eating. Up and down the sidewalks, around flower beds, under bushes, in the sidewalk cracks.

The sun was about to go down and I was still outside, now cleaning two window air conditioners for the rental house next door. Not hard work, just tedious because I had to use cotton swabs to get into every crevice.

After dark I headed into the house for a break. Jim had long-since showered and was sound asleep. But I hated to stop. It felt like I was on a roll. Then I remembered I had not watered the flowers in pots up on main street by our barn. So at 11 p.m. I drive water jugs up to the flowers there. The adrenalins must have been pumping because when I got back to the house I decided then was the time to make a new flower bed and plant the last of the annuals I had on the porch. By midnight it was done and I looked back with satisfaction over my accomplishments.

Like I said, I didn't want the day to end.



A VA worthy of our Veterans' service

As citizens, we have a duty to preserve those freedoms and liberties that generations of Americans gave their lives to establish and protect. We also have a duty to make certain the veterans we are fortunate to still have with us today receive the highest quality and most timely care our country can offer, something they deserve from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Unfortunately, this agency is failing our nation's heroes and thousands of veterans have begun to lose hope in an agency created to serve them.

We have all heard the recent news reports from across the country of VA staff developing "secret waiting lists" of veterans waiting to see doctors to get around policies on reporting extended delays. Most disturbing is CNN's report that at least 40 U.S. veterans died waiting for appointments at the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care system, many of whom were placed on a secret waiting list. But incidents of mismanagement and even death caused by failures at the agency are far more numerous than what we see on the news.

Every day, Kansans reach out to me to share their troubling experiences. The stories come from whistleblowers, veterans and family members across our state who speak of veterans being disregarded or made to feel like a number — rather than like patriots deserving of care from a grateful nation.

Jack Cobos of Topeka sought emergency care for chest pains at Topeka's Colmery-O'Neil Veterans Medical Center, and was told the pain was from

Capitol Views

Sen. Jerry Moran



the muscles around his heart, not a heart attack. Less than a week later, Jack received several stents in his heart at a community hospital to correct severe blockages that caused back-to-back heart attacks. Jack never fully recovered and passed away on Jan. 17, 2013.

One year later, this same Topeka emergency room closed its doors to veterans seeking emergency treatment. I am still waiting for a response from the agency regarding the closure, when it will reopen and claims of negligence.

Dave Thomas of Leavenworth recently told me about his appalling experience with the VA claims and appeals process. Dave filed a claim for service-connected disabilities in 1970. This distinguished veteran just received a 90 percent disability rating from the agency — 44 years later.

The Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic in Liberal has been without a doctor for nearly three years. I have inquired with the agency and heard numerous promises that they are "close" to hiring a provider. Unfortunately, this is yet another broken promise.

These stories just skim the surface of the struggles Kansas veterans face because of the agency's claims backlog, mismanagement, lack of oversight and difficult environments. I have repeat-

edly raised these issues with the agency through direct conversations with Secretary Shinseki as well as his staff, but I rarely — if ever — get a response. Veterans are calling for change, yet the agency continues on a glide path of dysfunction.

The department suffers from a bureaucratic culture that accepts mediocrity, leaving too many veterans without the care they need. The culture seems to be more concerned about making their quotas and checking boxes than taking care of veterans. Our veterans deserve better — they deserve the best our nation has to offer. That starts with new leadership.

Two weeks ago, for the first time in my 18 years serving in Congress, in both the House and Senate — I called for the resignation of a sitting cabinet secretary. I did not take this decision lightly. Considerable thought about the state of the department and constantly hearing stories of Kansas veterans being mistreated led to my call for Secretary Shinseki's resignation. Enough is enough. Accountability starts at the top, and there is a difference between wanting change and making it happen.

In the absence of dramatic change, it's clear that we are not prepared for the servicemen and women returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are not capable of caring for our aging veterans as we promised.

We should not rest until our veterans have a Department of Veterans Affairs worthy of their service and sacrifice.

Don't forget to thank a Kansas farmer for your vacation

All across our country Americans are checking their automobiles, studying road maps and adding another item to their "to do" lists in preparation for long-awaited summer vacations.

Anticipation will soar and expectations will rise as husband and wife teams take to this country's highways and byways in search of rest, peace and tranquility. Children will ensure this dream remains only partially fulfilled with road questions like: "I'm hungry, I want a hamburger and fries." "Mommy, Billy is teasing me." "Are we there yet?" and "I don't want to go on vacation, I want to go back home."

Regardless of such comments, mom and dad will remain true to their plans — determined as the Griswold's heading to "Walley World" — and push ahead. After all, the money spent for the family vacation usually represents cash left over after paying for the family's food, clothing and other necessities. Oftentimes money to pay for vacations goes on plastic and is paid for later with interest.

Parents will think to themselves and comment, "We worked hard for this time off. We deserve it and we're going to enjoy it."

Insight

John Schlageck



Americans remain the luckiest, most pampered people in the world. Try to imagine what it would be like if we had to be self-sufficient. What would happen to leisure time if others did not produce the many things families need?

Although we all work throughout the year, we should not forget those people who also work hard and help us free up time so we can vacation with loved ones. One such group is the Kansas farmer and rancher. They help meet our food, fuel and fiber needs. These needs are met without worry of availability.

The next time you walk into your local supermarket remember that milk comes from carefully cared for dairy cows on someone's Kansas farm. Remember the butcher performs a service in cutting and packaging the hamburger, chops and steak you and your family eat. But, don't forget the Kansas farmer

and rancher cares for and produces that pork and beef. Styrofoam cartons only hold the eggs which are laid by hens on the farm.

No other nation of people on this planet enjoys the amount of free time we do. No other country can claim that so few people feed so many. Today less than two percent of our nation's population is farmers. They are capable of supplying the other 98 percent with most of our food and fiber.

Remember as you plot your vacation course this summer, and as you motor through the state's highways, notice the fields of corn, soybeans, milo and alfalfa. Take a look at the cattle, hogs and sheep grazing in the many pastures. Don't forget Kansas farmers and ranchers help fulfill our food and fiber needs. These professionals also care for the livestock and crops you see as you drive by. They do so with as much care as they possibly can.

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

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THE NORTON TELEGRAM

E-mail: nortontelegram@nwkansas.com

ISSN 1063-701X

215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, KS 67654

Published each Tuesday and Friday by Haynes Publishing Co., 215 S. Kansas Ave., Norton, Kan. 67654. Periodicals mail postage paid at Norton, Kan. 67654.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Norton Telegram, 215 S. Kansas, Norton, Kan. 67654. Official newspaper of Norton and Norton County. Member of the Kansas Press Association, National Newspaper Association, and the Nebraska Press Association

OFFICE HOURS:
8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Mon.-Thur.
8 a.m.-5:00 p.m. Friday
Phone: (785) 877-3361
Fax: (785) 877-3732

STAFF

Dana Paxton..... General Manager
Advertising Director
dpaxton@nwkansas.com
Dick Boyd..... Blue Jay Sports
nortontelegram@nwkansas.com
Michael Stephens..... Reporter
Managing Editor
mstephens@nwkansas.com
Shylo Paxton..... Society Editor
spaxton@nwkansas.com
Vicki Henderson..... Computer Production
Marcia Shelton..... Office Manager

Nor'West Newspapers
Dick and Mary Beth Boyd
Publishers, 1970-2002

Kansas Press Association

