

Other Viewpoints

Rude tweet teaches free-speech lessons

In overdue acts, Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback and the Shawnee Mission School District corrected course in the fracas over a rude tweet by 18-year-old Emma Sullivan of Prairie Village. The governor apologized that his staff created the issue, and the district dropped its attempt to extort an apology from Sullivan.

The issue now should be at an end. But being that this started at a school function we hope that there is a lesson learned by all involved.

Recently, Sullivan, a Shawnee Mission East senior, thumbed out: "Just made mean comments at gov brownback and told him he sucked, in person (hash)heblowsalot" and hit send.

That's how it started. And for many observers, the first thought was: If we're going to create a hubbub every time a teenager is rude, we're not going to have time for much else in our connected society.

Sullivan's tweet initially was hardly a big deal, and it was unlikely to become a broader holiday weekend talking point if not for the overreaction of the governor's staff.

But the larger point, reinforced by the governor, is that in our democracy it is wholly appropriate for a detractor of an elected official to voice that displeasure. In fact, it is essential to the future of a working democracy that voices from all corners are heard. Speaking out (preferably in a more civil fashion) should be encouraged, certainly by schools and elected officials.

We would suggest, for future detractors, the wording could have been clearer. A point made precisely and politely may not attract as much attention as a rude comment, but it does add to civil dialogue, always a good thing. Sullivan, in later statements, noted that her objection to Brownback stemmed from funding cuts to schools. Something along the lines of: "How does Brownback expect to fix state economy while gutting schools, diminishing future workers" would have been a more acceptable comment.

We also note that it is entirely appropriate for the governor's office to seek out and consider the comments of as many Kansans - fans and foes - as possible. The problem in this case was the reaction. The governor's office should have responded to Sullivan, not to those who would punish her or feel threatened by a governor with power over the school budget. The reaction was little more than elementary school tattling about what Brownback later noted was the exercise of "one of our most treasured freedoms."

As for the initial reaction of school officials, to complain about the reaction and break out bromides such as "Your views reflect on all of us" (kids, just so you'll know, they don't) is a disservice to education.

School administrators live in a world where bold action always seems risky, but for the future, here's a better idea: Stick up for the basic rights, such as free speech, that you teach students to value.

- Kansas City Star, via the Associated Press

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MARGOLIES
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Wrong kind of traveler served here

It was my hope they had room for one more!

Some years ago I rolled into a small community after sundown, looking for a motel room. I was in that town to begin work the following morning at the newspaper.

While I drove the streets of what was going to be my new home, I kept an eye out for a motel. I was not familiar with the town at all, so finding a motel was a bit more of a chore than I thought it would be.

Finally, after an hour's search, I spotted what looked like a pretty nice motel. Apparently it was a popular stop for travelers because there were quite a few cars parked near it along the street.

It was well-lit and had an attractive sign on the front that included a large clock. That was nice because tired travelers, like me, don't always keep track of the time.

I managed to find a parking spot about a half block away. With my fingers crossed, I walked up to the front door, opened it and just seconds later a man appeared. "Quick service," I thought to myself.

"Yes, sir, what can I do for you?" he asked. "Do you have room for one more?" I replied.

He looked me over and then said, "You're not the right kind."

That comment sort of blew me away. "Right kind?" I asked. "What do you mean 'right kind'?"

"Well, for starters," he said, "this is a mortuary." And he then began to laugh.

I was speechless. I told him no offense but



Tom Dreiling

• Man of the Plains

it looked like a very modern, up-to-date motel. He thanked me for my kind words and directed me to the area of town where I would find lodging, "for the right kind." He was right, there was a choice of motels in that area.

As I sat on the edge of the motel bed, giving thought to this experience, the voice in my head started talking. "Hey, stupid," the voice said, "did you not notice there was no parking lot at or near the place you thought was a motel?" The voice was right on both counts, "stupid" being count one.

If someone tells you sometime that "you are not the right kind," don't feel offended, rather rejoice! You are still alive.

We are a year away from casting our ballots for president, so it's time for the Man of the Plains to make the following declaration: President Obama will be challenged by former Gov. Mitt Romney. The talking heads - the bunch that claims they know everything - are struggling with this issue. They are the ones from those so-called exclusive schools of thought being paid big bucks to answer what this former student at Fort Hays State University just answered - and I did it for nothing!

Please allow me a few words about the passing of a truly great guy. Ken Haas had more friends than he could ever have imagined. The reason being, Ken Haas was a kind, gentle, considerate soul who drew an incredible following through his years as a school counselor and educator at Kennedy Middle School and principal at Thomas-More Prep-Marian, as well as a sports enthusiast.

And his smile would attract many more. He didn't have to say a word, just flash that smile and you felt closeness that salted a friendship.

I know Hays is a better place because of Ken Haas. His goodness rubbed off on all who had the pleasure of knowing him, meeting him, greeting him. If there ever was a Mr. Positive, it was Ken Haas. He left us just a short time ago and from that moment on he was missed by wife Cheri, his three daughters, sons-in-law, grandkids, siblings, neighbors, friends, his dog and countless others who got wind of his death as word spread throughout his community.

We grieve in silence, but we speak proudly of this man who fought so hard for so long before giving himself up to the very Creator who brought him into this world. He is now a member of "God's Club."

Thanks, Ken.

Tom Dreiling of Denver is a former publisher of the Colby Free Press and The Norton Telegram, and a former long-time editor of the Old Goodland Daily News. He is a life-long Democrat, a curmudgeon come lately and a newly minted Coloradan.

Tree house and vacant lot shaped youth

Harken back to the days when you were a kid. Being outside was fun. Heck, it was everything and more often than not messy.

But that was fun. Acceptable. It's what we did.

Messy meant jumping in the middle of a mud puddle with your clothes on. Messy meant scaling a giant dirt pile down next to the elevator but most of all being a kid meant messing around in the vacant lot next to the church.

Growing up in a small rural community of 50 hearty souls, this vacant lot was a fertile source of education as important as any classroom. It was our world of make believe, where we played, laughed, cried, cultivated our imaginations and learned to get along with others.

It was here, away from parental oversight, our values developed and we morphed from childhood to manhood. We didn't even realize this was happening. We were just living every day in the present and having fun.

This vacant lot is where we played football, pom-pom pull away, rollers, bouncers and flies, constructed forts, dug tunnels and built our first tree house. All the things our parents wouldn't let us do in our own yards.

One of our first tree houses was a real challenge. First my brother Albert and I had to select the best and tallest Chinese elm in the row north of the church. This tree had to sport a straight, heavy-base limb, preferably the thickest one to support our structure.

Living in a small, rural village we had access to plenty of lumber. Dad had several piles in our big shed. There were also several abandoned barns that we raided to build our tree houses. We also built rafts and planes.

Before we began construction on our tree



John Schlageck

• Insights
Kansas Farm Bureau

house, we made a wooden ladder. For this we sawed two-foot lengths of lumber and secured them to the tree with two nails. Any more and the boards would split.

We hoisted lumber for the platform of our tree house with ropes and secured it in a good deep crotch in the elm. On this first tree house, we didn't stop with a simple platform but continued with walls that extended waist high.

Once finished, we proceeded to hoist all the essentials for our fort above ground. This included Red Ryder BB guns, binoculars, a tarp in case of rain, plenty of water and hand-picked fruit from our trees at home.

Every once in a blue moon, we'd haul up an old galvanized bucket, fill it with dry twigs, build a fire and roast marshmallows over the flames. There was always a rope on the bucket in case the fire raged out of control and we needed to move it out of our tree house.

From our perch high above the mere mortals some 25 feet below us, we lived our days in another world. One of our favorite activities involved bird watching. We loved seeing the robins and king birds carefully building their nests. We couldn't wait to see the eggs the momma birds laid and patiently sat on until they hatched into the ugly, naked chicks.

We watched for hours as the parents brought

wiggling worms to the chicks who ate everything dropped into their snapping beaks. Seems they never got enough. Ever wonder how many careers of future biologists began in a vacant lot?

And while we tried to be there when the young birds flew for the first time, we didn't always see their inaugural flights. We often wondered how many made the grade and how many were snapped up by marauding neighborhood felines.

One of the absolute best things about our tree house was the advantage it gave us for picking off the pesky sparrows, which were the only birds we were allowed to shoot with our BB guns. We didn't like them much anyway because they were such scavengers and ate more than their fair share of bird seed.

The vacant lot in our little village was our ticket to an abundance of far-away adventures. We went on safari with Smilin' Jack, tracked down Indians with Jim Bridger and battled at the Alamo with Davey Crockett. Just about anything we could think of we did as youngsters using our imaginations and the vacant lots.

Some days we did nothing at all but lay on our backs while looking up at the big sky of Western Kansas. Thoughts rolled through our minds like the passing clouds overhead.

We didn't want for much as youngsters in those days gone by. Everything we desired was right there in the vacant lot.

John Schlageck of the Kansas Farm Bureau is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. He grew up on a diversified farm near Seguin, and his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

