

Other Viewpoints

Identity theft a chilling ordeal

The long ordeal Candida L. Gutierrez had to suffer after another woman literally stole her life is something that shouldn't be wished upon anyone, although it should be enough to convince everyone of the importance of protecting their own identity.

Fortunately, the worst is behind Gutierrez – although some legal clean-up still remains to be done – and she can feel comfortable about moving on with her life without the illegal shadow that has tormented her for almost 12 years.

That shadow and imposter, illegal immigrant Benita Cardona-Gonzalez, a Topeka resident, was sentenced Monday in federal court in Wichita to 18 months in prison for possessing fraudulent identification documents, after which time she will be deported.

Some readers of CJonline.com, who added their comments to a story by the Associated Press about Gutierrez and Cardona-Gonzalez, suggested an 18-month prison term was not nearly enough punishment for the damage and pain inflicted by the identity thief.

It's certainly difficult to disagree with the readers on that point, but the prosecutor who negotiated the deal with the defense attorney for Cardona-Gonzalez must have thought it was the best way to close the case. The judge handling the case also had reservations about the short sentence but decided to go with the negotiated deal.

Frankly, it is what it is and Gutierrez, a school teacher in Houston, now has her life back and her tormentor can do her no more harm. Her experience, however, should serve as a warning to all of us.

The Associated Press story didn't note how Cardona-Gonzalez managed to steal Gutierrez's identity in the first place, but once she had it, the Mexico native used it to get bank accounts, a job, driver's license and a home mortgage, all in Gutierrez's name.

Gutierrez, meanwhile, was turned down for a mortgage and couldn't convince the Social Security Administration she had been the target of identity theft. She even had to suffer the humiliation of being forced to file her federal income tax forms using a special identification number usually reserved for illegal immigrants.

During sentencing, the attorney for Cardona-Gonzalez said his client didn't have an understanding of how difficult it would be for Gutierrez to get her identity back. That's difficult to believe, given how deeply Cardona-Gonzalez immersed herself in her false identity and the fact she was brazen enough to claim she was the identity theft victim and was even issued a new Social Security number.

Apparently, it's easier to lose an identity than to reclaim it. That's why it's important everyone protect their own and be careful about sharing personal information that could be used to create, on paper, a duplicate.

— *The Topeka Capital-Journal, via the Associated Press*

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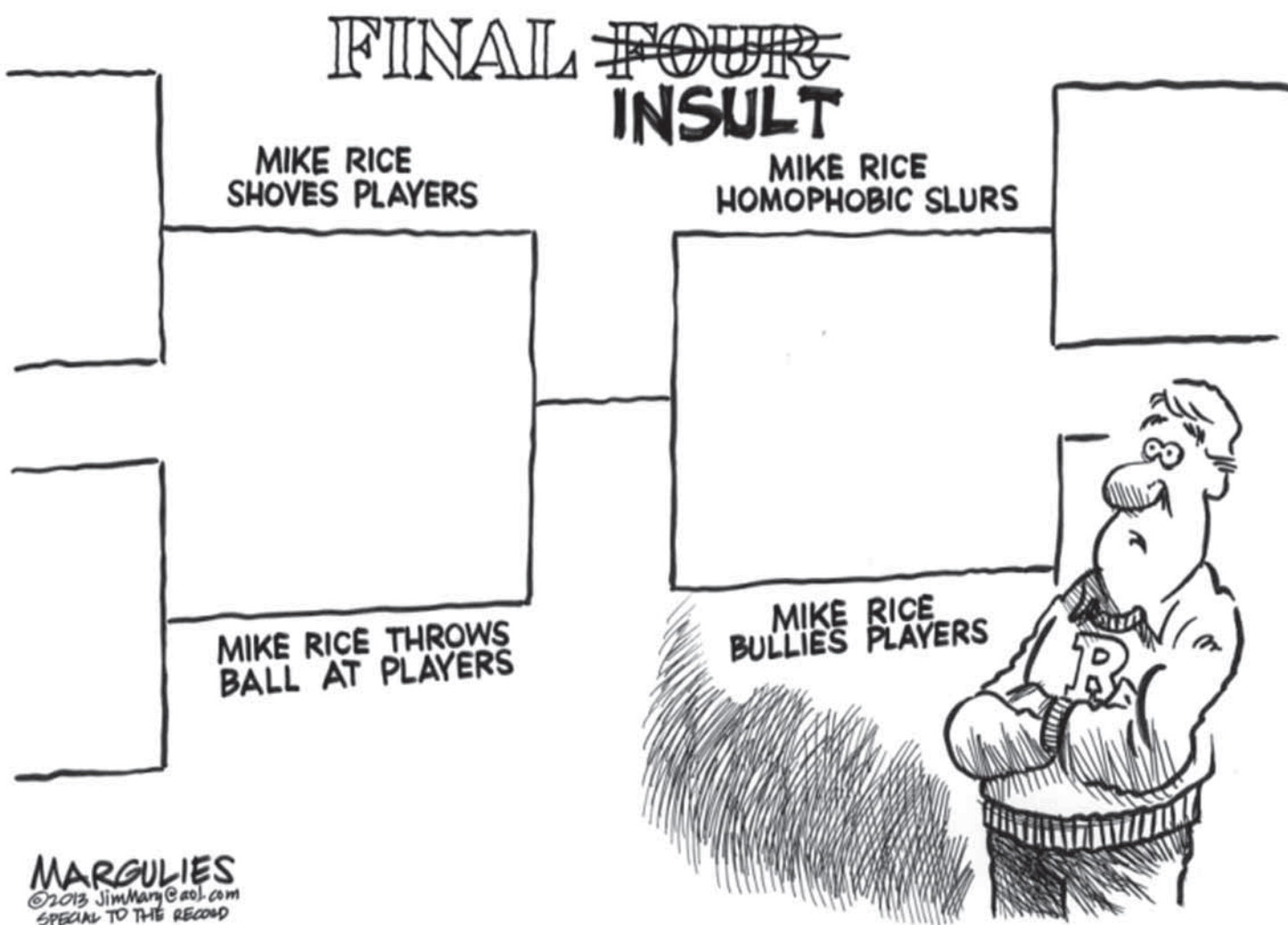
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College faces challenges, opportunities

As I began to write my latest college report, the story of Rip van Winkle came to mind.

If you remember, Rip van Winkle is a fella who goes off into the woods, is "bewitched" and then falls asleep. He wakes up 20 years later to find things have changed quite a bit.

When I looked back on my calendar, I realized I had not written for the newspaper since November. It was almost as if I had been hibernating – though not asleep or idle – and now spring has come. To that end, I feel compelled to try to bring you up to date as we enter the home stretch of the school year.

As you might imagine, the final weeks of spring are harried as we struggle to complete reports, evaluations and the budget. The latter task keeps us the busiest. The challenge is to maintain the leanest budget while meeting the needs of students, employees and community. Knowing that the college has no significant reserve for emergencies, we are working to create a budget that spends less than it receives in an effort to build a firmer financial base.

The problem is that when we try to hold the line on the budget, inflation and maintenance of property cause significant additions. Further, we are unsure about what may happen to money from the state operating grant. Anything from a 2 to 4 percent decrease seems likely now – approximately \$81,000 less in revenue. Add in the unknown number of new students next year, which impacts revenue, and I find more grey (and less hair) in the mirror.

Simply put, Colby Community College will live within its budget for 2014 and when it is presented to the community, the budget will be based on providing a quality education and



Steve Vacik

• From the president

services while holding to austerity.

The college is holding to a number of events over the next six weeks you may want on your calendar. At 7 p.m. Thursday and Saturday, April 18 and 20, the college will have performances of "Paint Your Wagon," in the Northwest Kansas Cultural Arts Center. This popular musical, featuring both students and community players, will be an event for the whole family. Thanks to choral director Randy Berls for his direction of the production.

That same weekend, from 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, April 19, the college will help hold the third annual Art Walk in downtown Colby. This will feature local artists and their work, as well as providing activities for all ages. Thanks to Rebel Jay, art instructor, for her work.

Then at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 23, in the Cultural Arts Center, will be "Happy Film: A Documentary about Happiness," continuing the series of documentary films which have been shown during the year, thanks to psychology instructor and counselor Ryan Hale.

These are just a few of the events in which the college is proud to play a role. Of course, do not forget commencement at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 11, in the Community Building, wrapping up spring activities at the college.

Finally, April 16 marks my two-year anniversary at Colby. Hard to believe. My hope when I arrived was that we would take the college to new heights – to be different, better and purposeful. Though we are not as far along as I hope we will be in the future, the college has taken some positive steps.

We have opened new centers at Norton and WaKeeney, coinciding with enrollment increases in the nursing program. We have introduced additional on line programs, including vet-tech, virtual office assistant and medical coding. We brought back homecoming in the fall of 2011 and began a Hall of Fame for alumni and friends just this spring.

We even engaged in an energy savings project which allowed the college to retro-fit heating and cooling systems and replace some roofing. Not that these were due to me – I work with great folks who make things happen and deserve accolades for vision and hard work.

My point is that good things are taking place at your community college and will continue. I appreciate past efforts. But, as we look to the future, I remind you that to be all that we can be will require your steadfast support.

Just like Rip van Winkle after his nap, we find ourselves in a new and exciting place even if we still wax a bit nostalgic about days gone by. Here's hoping we can look back in two years and be grateful for even more achievements which I expect will come.

Dr. Stephen Vacik is president of Colby Community College. Vacik is a native of Fargo, N.D., and was vice president of instruction at East Mississippi Community College before moving to Colby.

We'd be better off if parties were relevant

The national political parties used to strive to be broadly inclusive, pressing their members to build policy consensus among disparate coalitions. Now that is much less evident. This is one reason we so often see legislative impasse on Capitol Hill.

A few weeks ago, the Republican National Committee issued a 100-page report aimed at reviving the GOP after its poor showing in last November's elections. It was remarkably blunt about the specifics of the party's shortcomings – its lack of inclusiveness, its hapless data initiatives, its poor grassroots organizing. What it did not take on, however, was an issue the committee can do little about: the diminished influence, if not irrelevance, of both major parties in American politics.

In the early years of my political career, the parties were pretty much the only game in town. If you wanted to be a candidate, there was no one else to turn to for help with building a campaign organization, finding volunteers, making contact with activists and donors or creating a network of supporters. People could and did win elections without official party support – but not often, and not easily.

The parties also registered voters, turned them out and provided much of the campaign funding. They not only articulated policy and kept the other party honest, but also served to forge a policy consensus among the disparate coalitions that made them up, striving to make themselves as inclusive as possible.

All this is much less evident these days. At the top, once the nomination is sewed up, presidential candidates run independently of the party. They have their own staffs, do their own

Other Opinions

• Lee Hamilton
Center on Congress

fund raising and build their own organizations. I'll be stunned if we don't see future presidents take a leaf from President Obama's playbook and form their own grassroots organizations outside the party apparatus to pressure Washington lawmakers.

The rise of increasingly influential outside players has done much the same thing for candidates lower down. They can now hire their own signature-gatherers for petitions, their own pollsters, their own consultants and specialists in virtually every aspect of modern campaigning. Scores of groups representing various factions within a party have emerged as significant players in the political process. The parties are simply outmatched in resources and organization. They've even lost control of campaign funding, as special interest groups not only put money behind or against candidates, but also turn out voters on behalf of their favorite issues.

The parties' loss of influence is especially obvious when you look at primaries. Where party approval once was tantamount to nomination, today it's anything but. In last year's elections, any number of party-approved candidates were beaten by well-funded outside

challengers. It's one of the reasons that building consensus on Capitol Hill has become so difficult: With congressional districts drawn to favor one party or another, incumbents live in fear of taking a stance that might draw a challenger with special-interest backing.

At the state and local level, party organizations are finding it harder than ever to recruit volunteers interested in building the party itself, rather than in promoting a cause by trying to take over its apparatus. Where volunteers once put in hours licking stamps, registering voters or getting people to the polls, today far fewer people feel they can justify the time.

Obviously, the parties are not entirely out of the game. Some roles only a national party can play, as with the presidential nominating process. But where they once exerted control, now they can at best hope for influence.

I favor strengthening the role of political parties in our system. They once played a central role in identifying candidates, articulating ideas and positions and identifying talent for government; today, those jobs often are not performed at all. Robust political parties might even help break the impasse in Washington. They used to bring a wide array of Americans together under one banner, and pressed their members to learn how to build consensus on behalf of a larger cause. This was a skill that carried over to Capitol Hill. Independence from the party may be a fine thing for self-expression, but it carries a cost to the country.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

