

Sunshine Week promotes the people's right to know

This is Sunshine Week, dedicated to open government.

It's a new national celebration, devoted to the idea that the people need to know what their public servants are doing.

In a democracy, that should be a simple concept.

In Kansas, it drew support from the governor, legislative leaders, the attorney general and members of Congress. And it comes just a couple of weeks after the attorney general met privately with members of the state Board of Education to talk about evolution.

That illustrates the problem: Often, officials are afraid to discuss public business out in the open. They may seek political advantage, or they're embarrassed by the topic. Sometimes they claim they're protecting someone's privacy, or avoiding a lawsuit.

State open meetings and open record laws have exceptions to cover legitimate problems, but the reasons for secrecy often go beyond those. Officials sometimes don't understand the people's right to know, or they just don't care.

Kansas has good laws, but still officials try to dodge them when they think openness will hurt them. Sometimes, they keep secrets just because they can. Clerks often put roadblocks in the way of citizens seeking government records, though the law may say they are open.

Ignorance of this right may be its worst enemy. Often people go home without the information they need or want about their government.

In a continuing push for openness, the Kansas Press Association has formed a coalition to put open government into the state Constitution, protecting the right to know for all time and publicizing its importance.

This drew broad support in Topeka, everywhere from the governor's office to the Democratic and Republican leadership, both liberal and conservative. The coalition has been hampered by the evolution meetings, however, and the amendment hasn't moved much.

Federal law is much weaker than states'. While Congress generally meets in open session, federal agencies cling to secrecy. Citizens may spend years and thousands of dollars chasing public records.

In Washington, Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas conservative, and Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Vermont liberal, have joined forces to push a stronger Freedom of Information Act. It would restore much of what citizens have lost in recent years, though the secrecy surrounding the Patriot Act remains a problem.

Sen. Cornyn, a former state attorney general, said it well Thursday:

"I can't think of an issue that's more central to who we are than open government. We are a self-governing people."

Open government is the bedrock of our democracy, he said; "It allows taxpayers to see where their money is going."

Amen to that. And happy Sunshine Week.

— Steve Haynes



Who'd steal an old lady's walker

What do you say to a person who has just taken an old lady's walker? "Cynthia, you'd better visit your mom again real soon."

I try to get to Concordia to see mom every couple of weeks. Sometimes, the visit is only for an hour or so. Lately, however, I've been trying to make it longer so I can take her for an outing.

My mother lives in a rest home. A few years ago, she had her own home. Then she sold the house and moved into an apartment. About two years ago, she had a stroke and moved to an assisted living center.

Then she got over medicated and fell one night, breaking her hip. Now she's on the nursing home side of the same home. She still sees all her old friends, but she gets more assistance and physical therapy.

She takes all this moving about with a shrug and a smile, but gets pretty bored at the nursing home, since her mind is still sharp and she's always loved to travel.

She can go short distances with a walker and uses a wheelchair for longer trips.

So it was last month, I arrived in Concordia about 3 p.m. We were set for an outing to the grocery, topped off with supper at Pizza Hut.

We left her wheelchair in the airlock at the nursing home and put the walker in my trunk.

At the grocery, we wheeled around in a chair they provide and



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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bought some non-necessities, including cookies, dried fruit and cheese.

I drove as close as I could to the front door of Pizza Hut, and we grabbed the first table by the door. My sister came by and joined us, and we polished off a large pepperoni.

When we got back to the nursing home, I found that the front door is locked at 5 p.m. and after that, you have to use the back door.

Mom's wheelchair was locked between the two front doors, which have an alarm. Mom's room is near the front, and there was no way she could walk from the back door to her room.

I left her in the car at the front door and dashed around back. It wasn't hard to find a nurse, who helped me to unlock the front door without setting off the alarm. I got Mom loaded into her chair and the nurse took over while I drove the car around back to park and unload our purchases.

Mom was in her room and I was running late, so I kissed her and

headed for home. I was in Smith Center when I realized the walker was still in my trunk.

I called my sister, but she said not to worry, the nursing home would get Mom a loaner.

I tried to find someone heading for Concordia. I know several people who go there regularly. The college student didn't come home that week or the next, though. The retired coach wasn't going that way. The former publisher's wife would have been happy to take it when she went to see her mom, but she didn't get it in time.

I finally got the walker back to Mom last weekend, and we went on another outing to the store. This time, I left the wheelchair where we could retrieve it and put the walker in the back seat. We remembered both, and this week I felt better.

After all, who wants to be the one to take a blind person's cane, a baby's candy or an old lady's walker?

Homes built for family, chicks

The chicks were delivered safe and sound, although not to the original recipient we had intended.

Juarez, Mexico, is a huge sprawling city without the benefit of a sophisticated infrastructure. In the outlying areas where we usually build houses for a needy family, there are no sewer or water lines, sometimes no electricity, definitely no telephones or home mail delivery.

There was no way to contact her, but we made an attempt to take the chicks to the home of Sylvia, who we built a house for last month. We drove out to the house, but found no one at home. The makeshift gate to her property was closed and padlocked. We debated leaving the box of chicks inside the gate, but with cats and dogs abounding, we knew all Sylvia would come home to was a box of feathers.

Rather, we decided to adopt the chicks out to the family we were building for this time: the father, Tony; a granddaughter, Rosa; one or two sons; and perhaps other grandchildren.

Tony's sister Isabella lived next door and was very kind to our team of college kids from Wisconsin. She and her mother made gorditas for everyone. They even invited the adult women in our group to come into their house, where they demonstrated how to make tortillas.

I watched them closely, but I don't think I can duplicate their technique. They were so fast and made it look so easy.

Back to the chicks. We were on the third and final day of building



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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when I commandeered three young men to build a chicken coop. The house was completed except for finishing touches and there was, suddenly, nothing for the kids to do.

Isabella was thrilled at the prospect of having chickens and showed me where we could build the pen. "What can we use?" the boys asked. That's almost funny, because Tony's compound was lined with potential building materials: old shipping pallets, pieces of corrugated tin and lumber in all shapes and sizes.

"Look around, boys," I said. "You're in Mexico. Be creative like the Mexicans are."

They took me at my word and created a rather impressive enclosure, complete with roof and swinging gate. In Juarez, what you are keeping out is as important as what you are keeping in. Following the dedication of the new house, we also dedicated the coop. That was probably a first in the history of Casas por Cristo.

We had been speaking to the chicks in Spanish, telling them they were going to become Mexican chickens and would have to learn the language. Some will become layers

and some will, undoubtedly, end up in chicken enchiladas. Either way, they will have served their purpose.

This trip was special. Oh, they are all special, but this one will stand out as being extra special. That's maybe because of the family's close involvement, maybe because the kids were so great to work with, or maybe because we were reunited with old friends. Maybe all of the above.

I know we are glad to be home and humbled by our luxurious lifestyle. We are tired and aching and needing to catch up on our sleep.

It's time to get back into the races here. But, Mexico keeps calling us back and we're already planning a return in October.

Want to go? Think about it. You won't regret it.

From the Bible

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
O LORD my God, thou art very great;
thou art clothed with honour and majesty.
Psalm 104: 1

Senate anteroom full of stars

Sitting in the Senate reception room, watching the great ones come an go, is an education in democracy.

There is Mary Landrieu of Louisiana, in earnest conversation with a supplicant. As most women in the Senate, she dresses as powerfully as the men.

Wandering through the halls, you notice that House members wear pins to identify them. That and their power suits get them through security.

(And apparently there were some embarrassing incidents before the pins, since there are 435 members, way too many for the guards to recognize on sight.)

Senators feel they are beyond that, too famous to need a badge of any kind.

And indeed, most of them are.

There's Orin Hatch, the Utah conservative, widely regarded as an old-fashioned legislative gentleman. In sweeps Maria Cantwell, a dot-com millionaire who reportedly spent her way to office. She sweeps off the floor, is met by a high-powered lobbyist and a gaggle of constituents.

Everyone wants a little of a senator's time. There are only 100 of them, and they wield great influence.

"I never wanted to be a senator,"



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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says one House member, "until I saw how much power they have."

Indeed, our own Sen. Pat Roberts is the darling of national television, now that he's chairman of the Intelligence committee. He's on the tube, and in the national paper, all the time. He's been a key player in the so-called intelligence reform.

Yet Roberts always has time to meet with groups from Kansas, listening to what they say, making his own points, rushing off to an interview.

Sen. Sam Brownback, by contrast, seems to focus his time on those he thinks can advance his career, and that reportedly includes a possible race for the White House two years down the road.

He never appears to talk with those who are waiting, staying on the floor to the last vote on bankruptcy reform.

John McCain rushes in and heads for the floor, looking like the star

that he is, two aides in his wake. Senators seldom go anywhere without an aide.

He's the brightest light we'll see. No Hillary, no Ted Kennedy, no Liddy Dole.

But there's no such thing, hardly, as an unknown senator, only new ones yet to make a national reputation.

As the debate winds down, the senators drift off for other things: dinners, receptions, meetings, maybe some time at home. By the next day, most will be on a plane to their home state, ready for a round of appearances.

They'll talk with voters and be down-home folks, most of them.

But here, in the glitter and gloom under the great dome, they're the stars, gleaming yet accessible, busy but taking time for the home folks.

It's an odd thing, this democracy, but it works, and it's a wonder to watch.

Couple proud of granddaughter

To the Editor:

We are proud of our granddaughter, Lacy Wolters, and the Fort Hays State University Financial Planning Team, which has once again won elevation to the Elite Eight in the American Express Planning Invitational, the national championship of college financial planning competition.

Fort Hays State University has made it to the finals in each of the five years that it has fielded a team. Lacy is a senior, along with team members Kendra Wise of Ellinwood and Lucas Horton of Pratt.

This team will be in Minneapolis, Minn., the world headquarters of American Express Financial Advisors, from April 13-16 to compete in the final two stages of the competition: an oral presentation of the plan and a knowledge "game show" competition.

Letter to the Editor

"Lacy, Kendra and Lucas will represent the university with professionalism, integrity, and pride," said Dr. Tom Johansen, associate profes-

sor of financial planning and program director.

Elsie Wolters Oberlin

Write

The Oberlin Herald encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of public interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

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