

Let's look for better way to select court justices

Is it wrong to want the Kansas Supreme Court to be more responsive to the will of the people?

Apparently. Sen. Sam Brownback, the Republican candidate for governor, is taking some heat this week for comments that the process for selecting justices could stand some reform.

The Democratic candidate, Sen. Tom Holland, ridiculed his opponent. An Associated Press analysis piece claimed that his comments meant Mr. Brownback was on the far right.

Anyone who's watched Sam Brownback's career knows he's a conservative, of course. He's never tried to hide his beliefs. But he keeps getting elected by big margins, so there have to be a lot of people voting for him. Maybe most of them don't like abortion or big government — or left-leaning judges — either.

The Kansas Supreme Court raised a lot of questions about its objectivity when it forced the Legislature to add more than \$1 billion to school spending a couple of years ago. Many people, some of them far to the right, others more moderate, criticized the court exercising powers that a lot of them saw as belonging to the Legislature under the state Constitution.

The real questions here are, is the selection process for the court fair and democratic and would changing the process restore some sense of humility to the justices?

Kansas Supreme Court justices hold their jobs until they die or retire. While theoretically, voters could remove a justice by simply voting against him or her during every-six-years "retention" votes, the truth is, no Kansas justice has been removed by that process.

In districts where judges still run for election, voters can and do remove a judge now

and then. Usually, the issue is based on performance on the bench, not a judge's political views or decisions. But everyone agrees, the electoral process makes judges think about how they handle issues.

The point is not to bend judges to the will of the voters, but to force them to at least consider it. Unpopular decisions sometimes are what a case calls for, after all.

With the Supreme Court, the selection process has been changed until it's anything but democratic. The governor gets three names to choose from, selected by a panel dominated by lawyers which meet and take votes in secret. If the governor fails to act, the chief justice gets to choose for him or her.

The people have no say, no voice. A federal lawsuit challenging the system was filed this summer, but a decision could be years away.

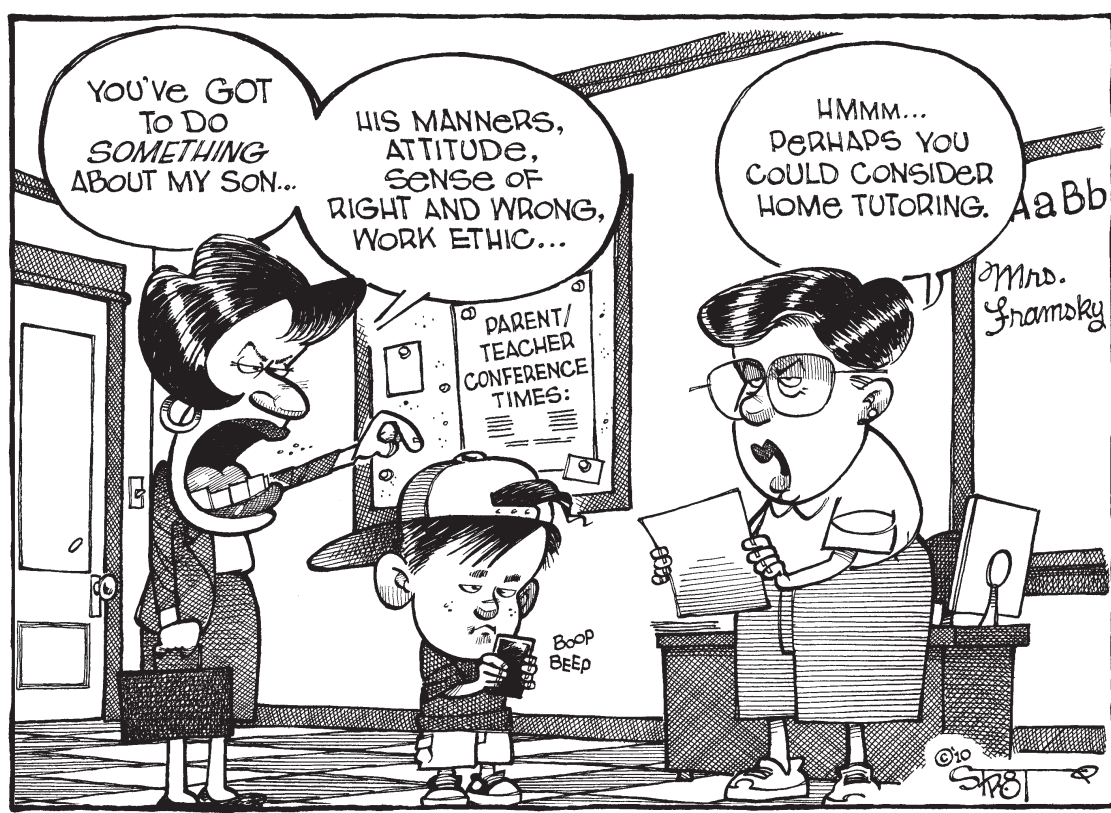
One proposal for change is to let the state Senate vote on the governor's nominees. Similar to the way federal Supreme Court justices are selected, this plan could at least provide a forum for public comment and push the process closer to the center. No one doubts today that the court leans to the left.

However, pro-school forces made sure that an amendment to change the selection process went nowhere in the Legislature the last few years. Courts are not supposed to be about one side or the other, however, but about the Constitution and the law.

So, Sen. Brownback has a lot of company when he questions the court selection process. If that makes him right-wing, so be it.

But many, including this newspaper, think it's high time the court is called to account for its decisions. Perhaps with a Republican governor, something will be done.

— Steve Haynes.



She goes goofy over 'gater

I held an alligator and even got to tickle his tummy last week during a visit to Colorado Gators, a fish farm and wildlife preserve.

The San Luis Valley of Colorado, which competes with northern Minnesota for the lowest temperatures in the winter, seems a strange place for an alligator preserve, but there it is, sitting above a series of geothermal wells. When the snow is on the ground, the water is nice and warm — sort of a very large hot tub for reptiles, amphibians and fish.

The farm started in 1974 when a family from Texas bought land with a plan to grow tilapia, a kind of African perch that requires warm water.

The fish did well, but there was all the leftovers after they were filleted and sent off to restaurants and fish markets of Denver. In 1987, someone got the bright idea of feeding the leftovers to alligators, so 100 baby gators were purchased from Florida.

The gators loved the leftovers and thrived in the 87-degree waters.

In 1990, the farm opened its doors to the public and became not only a working fish farm but a regional tourists attraction. Soon, it became a sanctuary for unwanted exotic pets of all types, as people started sending their oversized and overaged snakes, lizards and alligators there because the farm refuses to kill any of its exotic friends.

I've known about the wonderland of reptiles for many years and have hoped to visit, but with this and that and the other, the chance has just never come up.

This year, I vowed, would be my time. I would go see the gators. I would pet whatever there was to pet and I would look at whatever there was to look at.

And I did! The farm is about an hour and a half from where we stay in Colorado, so Steve dropped me off and went off and went on to do an errand of his own. He wanted to see the gators, but not for as long as I wanted to visit.

I walked into a long building full of glass of walls and aquariums. The containers contained boas up to 250 pounds and over 16 feet long, many of them former pets (and illegal in Oberlin, by the way). That's one big snake. Actually, the farm has about 15 big snakes, although they



Open Season

By Cynthia Haynes
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CYNTHIA and the little alligator.

weren't all quite that big. There are also a few crocodiles.

Smaller aquariums held corn snakes, gopher snakes, rattlesnakes and lizards of all kinds.

Outside were ponds and ponds or alligators: big ones, bigger ones and humongous ones, including Morris, which has appeared on the Tonight Show and has starred in several movies, including Happy Gilmore and Dr. Doolittle 2.

I was in reptile heaven. I wandered all over the place, and when Steve arrived, we had our official picture taken with a small gator. Steve also took my picture with the little fellow and petting several tortoises, which have the run of the place, although there are two-foot

fences every so often to keep them in separate areas.

These land turtles weigh in at 60 to 125 pounds, we were told. One went on a tear, knocking one of his smaller buddies over, then wedging himself in the ladies room. His keeper looked like she might spank him.

Visitors get a "certificate of bravery" for holding a gator. They seal it by having the gator chomp down on it, but if you ask me, he looked like he was tired of paper. So watch your hands.

It was a great trip. Maybe next year I can pet some of the snakes, but not the rattlers. Boas don't bite, do they?

Bob bopped by a golf ball

Was that four or fore?

That's what my brother, Bob, must have been asking after being hit in the gut by a hard-driven, low-flying golf ball last week.

He called late in the afternoon Friday to tell us he was in the intensive care unit of the local hospital. In his typical fashion he said, "I'll be OK. I'm still planning to go to Florida on Monday."

A black-and-blue belly is the only outward sign of his injury, but his doctor wanted to check out what might be going on inside. Bob said he had a round of CAT scans and gastrointestinal scopes. Does not sound like fun.

The good news: he was able to finish his round of golf.

— ob —

We haven't heard anything since Wednesday from the cowboy who stayed with us for a week. He was camping out at a deserted farmstead about 15 miles west of our county seat. He's traveling without a cell phone, so unless I read about him and Rico in another newspaper, I won't know where he is. He has our number, so we hope he calls.

— ob —

I had a long laundry list of things to get done before heading south with Bob for a visit with our transplanted-from-New York sister, Kathryn.



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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I mailed my clothes to Kathryn's house.

Hopefully, not having any luggage except my carry-on will help us get through the airport faster. The box is promised to arrive Tuesday, just hours after we arrive late Monday. I wish I had remembered to pack a jar of my homemade apricot jam in it.

Some things were added to my to-do list; some were deleted. I wanted to leave Jim with a nice, clean kitchen.

Instead, he'll have dirty dishes in the sink and clean dishes in the dishwasher. But, he will have two boxes of peaches in the freezer. I canned a few jars of tomatoes, but have the bulk of them to take care of.

Don't worry about him — he's the one who taught me how to can tomatoes.

He has potato salad in the fridge, hamburger ready to fry and quite a few other planned-overs. I know he won't go hungry.

Writing this column is the final item on my mental checklist. It's after 2 a.m. Sunday morning and I have to get up at 5 a.m. So, I better sleep fast.

From the Bible

The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands; the Lord has come from Sinai into his sanctuary.

When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from [a] the rebellious — that you, [b] O LORD God, might dwell there.

Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

Selah.
Psalms 68:17-19 NIV

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Hospital gets credit for life saved

To the Editor:

I would like to sing the praises of the Decatur County Hospital. The evening Tony had a heart attack, we went to the hospital, where he was treated promptly and with skill. They knew just what to do and they did it without hesitation.

After by-pass surgery, the first thing the surgeon told us was that he did not save Tony's life, the people where he was treated first are the ones who saved his life.

I have been a patient in the hospital myself, and I will say without hesitation that our little country hospital has one of the best nursing staffs anywhere.

They are compassionate, they know their stuff and do an above

Letter to the Editor

average job in every way.

Our doctors do not have such big egos that they are reluctant to send a patient on to a bigger facility if necessary. They do so without hesitation.

Any community that is fortunate enough to have a hospital will have negative rumors circulating from time to time.

If you live in Hays, you hear horror stories about Hays Medical Center; if you live in Kearney, Neb., you hear stories about the failures at the hospital there.

Every hospital has had a horror story to tell. After all, they are run by people, and I have yet to meet a perfect person practicing law, driving a car, cutting hair — you get my drift.

My experiences with both Hays Medical Center and the Decatur County Hospital have been very positive, and I just want to say thank you for your dedication, your caring and for being there.

Ramona Amlong,
Dresden

Photo Policy

The Oberlin Herald wants to emphasize photos of people doing things in the community. If you know of an event or news happening that we should attend, please call 475-2206.

Please be sure to allow a couple of days' notice so we can arrange to be there.

Space in the paper is limited and so is the time of our staff, so we may not be able to get to every event, but we will try.

Because space is so limited, we cannot run team or group photos, any pictures of people lined up or of people passing checks, certificates and the like. (We will always try to make room for a story about any of these events, however.)

We do run wedding and engagement pictures and "mug" shots with stories and obituaries, when they are provided to us. Please remember that we need a clear, sharp picture. Dark or fuzzy prints will not work.

We cannot return photos unless you submit a self-addressed, stamped envelope with clear instructions for return. Other photos submitted may be picked up at our office within two weeks. After that, they will be disposed of.

Laser proofs of photos which have run in The Herald are available, first come, first served.