

Wednesday's

Editorials, Columns & Letters

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Paper 'n Ink... Talking points...

By Lynn Brisendine

Among the stained glass, the beautiful Christmas decorations and a lot of good people, I did my best to hear the Cantata being sung by a talented choir this past Sunday.

The words wafted by, telling the story of a special birth with music and strong voices. But my mind strayed. I continue to try and grasp the ugly reality of an horrific event just 48 hours earlier.

The news channels rushed their staffs to a place far away from West Texas, yet too close because the sadness permeates an entire country.

Talking heads have droned on and on as a shocked and infuriated populace sits in a trance, not making sense of anything being heard.

One of the anchors asked an 'expert' about the thinking of a man possessed of demons. Another grilled a gun advocate on the availability of weapons designed to fight wars, not for use in a first grade class.

My mind wonders as the singing progresses and a special birth of an itty bitty baby is celebrated. How can a parent of a little girl or boy even breathe when someone so mentally deranged takes their lives?

The gun spokesman with his two days to plan his talking points... "Gosh, it's understandable that we allow anyone the availability of 30 round clips. After all, don't you think you need that much firepower if the bad guy assaulting you has that many?" Thoughts swirl, as I try to make sense of such thinking.

These NRA guys have gathered to continue their spiel, they are professionals well versed in making an argument, even in such awkward times. "You realize that in the theater shooting this past summer in Colorado, the shooter chose the only facility in the area having 'no weapons allowed' signs?" Again the numbness prevails.

I acknowledge the Second Amendment. I don't want anyone to come and take my bird gun. But, the shotgun I own has a plug installed that allows only two shells in the magazine and one in the chamber. Those are the restrictions demanded by the Parks and Wildlife Department concerning the hunting of migratory fowl.

Excuse me a moment. We "sportsmen" seem to have no problem with the fact that our hunting shotguns must be regulated to such an extent that the capacities are subject to a field check anytime a game warden wishes.

The church music continues and the three wise men enter the story. And just as suddenly a new twist of my thoughts. Where are the wise men we need today?

The tragedy talk stumbles along. A hundred times, maybe a thousand times, the words of one soft talking commentator after another ask the same questions. Queries that continue so many times in just this last year. As a matter of fact, just a week ago, we saw a malignant individual take out his twisted concerns on strangers by shooting them down in a shopping mall.

A questioner's commonsense query demands an answer, "Why do you think it is okay for someone to buy ammunition by the caseload, more than can possibly be needed for either hunting or protection purposes?" The prepared advocate tritely responded, "You never know when you will be faced by a large contingent of enemies and that extra ammo is needed to save your life."

The Cantata narrator intones a line which breaks the unwelcome abstraction going on within my thoughts... "Shut out the noise of this world, to hear Him speak"...

Three of my grandchildren ages 8, 6 and 5 marched past me earlier in the service and sat in a front pew with other youngsters.

I couldn't help myself, wondering how some grandparents were involved in unbearable misery as millions around them celebrate this special season, while I watch mine with pride and think of the special times coming next week watching them enjoy their Christmas. Too many other grandparents will bury their grandchildren this week. The grief must be terrible, the anger palpable, the questions unanswerable. I say a quick prayer for them in Connecticut.

Anger is definitely with me in this place of peace. It is almost overwhelming as the choir continues. Silent Night, Holy Night... the wonderful tune breaks through.

And with these consuming emotions comes so many thoughts of where do we go from this point.

Another talking head's comments come sharply into focus, "These mass shootings are becoming the norm in this country. We have them practically on a weekly basis."

Again, I don't want anyone to come and take my guns or yours. But, when will we as responsible and sane people begin to demand from our leadership some kind of protection from these evildoers who use these rights to murder individuals and mangle entire families?

If seven year-old murder victims don't sound alarms then what will?

Peace on Earth and Goodwill to Men. The program ends and the Benediction is delivered. With it, the only answer that I can find at this time is to say a prayer.

State Capital Highlights

Compiled by Ed Sterling, Texas Press Association



Shooting prompts focus on school emergency plans...

AUSTIN — Soon after news broke of a mass shooting by a lone gunman at a Connecticut elementary school on Dec. 14, Gov. Rick Perry asked Texas Education Commissioner Michael Williams to direct Texas school districts to review their emergency operation plans.

"It is essential that we ensure all Texas schools are equipped and ready to carry out a strategic plan to secure the safety of students and staff in the event of a threat such as the one that occurred today," Perry said.

Perry also referred school districts to the Texas School Safety Center at Texas State University in San Marcos as a resource to assist in developing a plan of response or improving an existing plan.

A 2005 state law requires school districts and public junior colleges to adopt and implement a multi-hazard emergency operations plan that includes district employee training and mandatory school drills to prepare students and employees for responding to an emergency.

In a statement of condolence following the Connecticut shooting in which 20 schoolchildren and six adults were

killed, Perry said, "The fact that so many victims were children weighs heavily upon the hearts and souls of each Texan and every American."

Texas' chief law enforcement officer, Attorney General Greg Abbott, had this to say:

"As a board member of the Texas School Safety Center, I am committed to making sure educators, students and law enforcement are working together to prepare Texas schools for the unthinkable. We must not wait until it's too late to act. We remind all schools to review their school safety plan to ensure they have proper procedures to keep students and campuses safe."

Speaker draws challenger
Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, speaker of the 150-member Texas House of Representatives for the 2009 and 2011 legislatures, is seeking a third term in that high office.

Competition for the leadership role comes in the form of Republican David Simpson of Longview, who is entering his second two-year term representing House District 7.

State Rep. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola, earlier had announced his candidacy for the speakership, but on Dec. 10, Hughes withdrew and an-

nounced his support of Simpson for speaker.

Simpson in effect said the race would not be about conservative credentials so much as style in administering the rules of the House in allowing what legislation reaches the House floor for debate.

On Jan. 8, opening day of the 83rd Texas Legislature, a vote will be called to choose who is to be the next speaker, as a matter of routine business.

DNA system hits milestone

Texas Department of Public Safety on Dec. 12 announced its DNA indexing system, that through cross-referencing and matching helps solve homicides, sexual assaults, burglaries and robberies, had reached its 10,000th "cold hit" resulting in an arrest or conviction.

Since 1998, the DPS reported, its CODIS Lab, which shares data with a nationwide FBI database, has helped solve 644 homicides, 3,399 sexual assaults, 4,273 burglaries, 556 robberies and hundreds of other miscellaneous crimes in Texas and other states.

Texas law requires registered sex offenders and convicted felons sentenced to Texas Department of Criminal Justice or juveniles committed to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department facilities to provide a DNA sample.

Sales tax collections
Texas Comptroller Susan Combs on Dec. 12 reported that state sales tax revenue in November was \$2.34 billion, up 13.1 percent compared to November 2011.

Collections were strong in retail trade, manufacturing, oil and natural gas, construction and telecommunications, Combs said.

December local sales tax allocations totaling \$552 million will be sent to cities, counties, transit systems and special purpose taxing districts, up 15.5 percent compared to December 2011, she added.

LBJ Library to cut ribbon
The LBJ Presidential Library, located on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, on Dec. 22 will open a redesigned core exhibit, and much more.

The opening, on what would have been Lady Bird Johnson's 100th birthday, features unprecedented access to private telephone conversations of President Lyndon B. Johnson, an interactive Vietnam War exhibit showing elements of the president's decision-making process and new theaters and films about the president, civil rights, LBJ's legacy and the First Family.

Also available will be a downloadable "app" and handheld guide to give visitors the choice of several different tours..

Thinking in Type...

by Brian Brisendine

Five days a week, without fail, I send the four hearts closest to mine off to school houses.

My oldest son is a third grader who reads well above his age level and looks forward to the games his classmates play in P.E.

My middle son is a first grader who shakes my hand every morning (it's a top-secret handshake that he guards closely) before eagerly running into his school building for a day of learning and fun with his young friends.

My baby girl spends considerable time and energy deciding on an outfit and appropriate hairdo sure to make her the envy of her Pre-kindergarten class, then kisses my cheek and struts into that building like she owns the place.

My wife sets a frantic pace every morning getting the family and all of her teaching materials ready for another day in the classroom.

I, the man of the house and protector of my small clan, watch this happen and let them all go forth to their destinations, confident that they will come home at the end of the day.

If there is a luckier man alive, I haven't met him.

These were just a few of the numerous thoughts I had Friday as I watched the confusing, frightening, maddening coverage of a terrible situation unfolding thousands of miles from my desk, but oh so close to my heart.

As is always the case in instances like the Newtown massacre, initial reports were conflicting and haphazard.

But what was clear almost from the start was that another madman with powerful weapons was wreaking havoc on innocent lives.

I watched as I worked and did both with a heavy heart and a longing to finish the day and be close to mine.

As soon as I got home, I called them all into the family room, wrapped my arms around them, said prayers and shed tears.

This wasn't the column I planned to write for this issue. I wish fervently it wasn't necessary or on my mind.

But I, like most I presume, have thought of little else since Friday.

Predictably and understandably, the reaction to that terrible event has created a discussion and a debate.

That is appropriate. It has led school districts to review and amend safety procedures and policies.

That is necessary. It has also led some to cry a call to arms.

That is unfortunate. Social media drivel, a few television hotheads and even some legislators are suggesting the answer to this plague is to arm our teachers and train them to be tactical fighters.

I am hard pressed to think of a worse idea.

The idea is a knee jerk reaction to an incomprehensible tragedy and I don't fault anyone for considering it briefly.

It shouldn't take long though, to see this solution as ill-conceived and small-minded.

Teachers, from Pre-K to high school, spend untold hours every year training to better themselves to better their pupils.

They attend conferences and workshops to learn new teaching methods and testing styles.

They should not be required, or even asked, to include the gun range in their continuing education credits.

The bloodshed resulting from accidents or overreactions in schoolhouses across the country would not be minimal.

Add to that the psychological stigma it would place on teachers and students.

Imagine how a young, impressionable mind would concentrate on what his teacher was writing on the board, rather than wondering what kind of gun was creating the bulge in her waistband.

Even more troubling, it is a sad fact that sometimes school shooters are students.

Arming a teacher, would necessitate their readiness and willingness to kill a student. At any moment. Every day.

In no way imaginable is that

conducive to a learning environment, from either side of the teacher's desk.

Finally, teaching a person to handle a gun safely, even shoot it proficiently, does absolutely nothing to prepare them for the kind of situation that would actually require them to do so.

Even hardened soldiers and lawmen lose their cool and make mistakes when under fire.

Unleashing an army of scared teachers with questionable skills is not the answer. It is a burden we should not place on their already-loaded shoulders.

Before my detractors paint me as a liberal lamb, know that I am not anti-gun.

I had an air rifle as a child. I was given a break-over 20 gauge shotgun for dove hunting at age 12. A few years later, I upgraded to a pump-action 12 gauge.

I have a pair of .22 caliber rifles that hold sentimental value.

I plan to teach my boys the same gun skills and safety I was taught.

That being said, I despise the NRA and its bully pulpit demanding that we are guaranteed the right to own a bigger machine gun than the guy across the street.

Nobody needs a machine gun. Nobody.

Nobody needs a military-grade assault rifle -- its sole intent, its only purpose -- to kill other human beings.

These are not tools for sport. They are weapons for murder.

I am tired of the old yarn, "Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

That is a half truth. The fine print on that worn out bumper sticker should read "But people with guns kill A LOT of people."

More guns. Bigger guns. Guns on every hip. It never ends.

Violence begets violence. Hate begets hate.

Fear begets paranoia. None belong in our schools.

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Letter to the Editor

As I think about the families that just lost their kids, my heart goes out to them. I'm talking about the school killings that just took place last week.

What are we parents, school staff and police doing to keep our kids safe? Our High School had guns last week. Our school staff said that it was not a big deal as the media made it sound. Mr. School Staff, to me it's a big deal when kids are bringing guns to school. I have put three daughters through these schools. Now the grand kids are going here. To me it's a big deal to keep my kids as well as the other kids safe.

I will start today visiting our schools to see where we can help keep our kids safe.

Thank You
John M. Garcia

Letter to the Editor

It's been a long time since I posted a Letter to the Editor: I definitely feel this needs addressing. Our Sheriff requested that some of his employees be allowed to carry over into 2013 some of their vacation time that they have not used. Otherwise they will lose this time. The Commissioners turned him down 4-0.

I could understand the Commissioners not wanting to set a precedent. And do agree this would not be a desired precedent. This one time could be an exception and stipulated as such.

When you earn a vacation you want to take it when you want to take it. When you have this many employees under one roof it is hard to schedule the ideal time for each one, without interfering with someone else's plans. Therefore, emergencies, unforeseen plans, and the coveted special holidays become changed round around throughout the year. Leaving someone short-handed.

I operated a successful business here in Brownfield for almost 30 years, and I found it very meaningful to work with my employees and give a little wiggle room on the rules, most especially if the employee had earned his stance and, very important, if it did not cost the company one thin dime to grant his wish. (This being the County's situation).

I would respectfully like to request the Commissioners re-think this matter and see if it would not create a better, more fair employee/employer relationship. This is my sole personal letter, not discussed or influenced by anyone other than my soul-mate Valerie.

William Russell