

What does Kalamazoo's Promise really promise?

Thursday, January 08, 2009

Kalamazoo

BY ROGER E. ULRICH

▼Advertisement

During 2007, I was blessed with the enlightening experience of sitting on the Kalamazoo Gazette's Readers Panel. While serving, I learned many things, among which was that to publish a document covering the expanse of information that newspapers are expected to provide and to do so every day is, in short, a daunting task.

Next, to consider an even greater impossible assignment, i.e., to try to fairly please all the individual tastes of a total community, clearly defines a job that I am happy not to have.

After years engaged in the task of being a university research professor, I had, at the time I sat on the Readers Panel, retired from teaching at Western Michigan University and returned to my farming roots. In that capacity I frequently pointed out to my fellow panelists and the Gazette editors that I represented a part of less than 1 percent of the total population of the United States of America. From that perspective I was frequently made aware that my interests, concerns and the realities that I and other small farmers face are seldom truly expressed within modern day media.

Quite often these days I express my views about life on the farm with the hope that folks will better understand what people close to the dirt feel and experience as we make hay, try to market eggs from our free-range chickens, meat from free-range beef and pork and nonpasteurized milk from our free-range goats.

In this spirit, I recently sent a letter to the editor of the Gazette that spoke to my concerns relating to The Kalamazoo Promise and the need to define what "being educated" truly means, beyond simply acquiring a high school diploma or a college degree. I presented my views in a poetic form, which, I was told by a Gazette editor, was not generally allowed for publication.

Over the years, the editors of the Gazette have been more than kind to me and once again have

maintained this attitude of kindness. After several inquiries about the fact I had not heard from them regarding my letter, they wrote affirming that they appreciate the fact that I have written well and eloquently about numerous issues but could not publish my questions regarding The Kalamazoo Promise in the form that I had used.

Given such encouragement, I decided to try again to share the questions about The Promise submitted earlier in a poetic way and now offered in a more traditional manner, with the hope The Promise might be made more promising. The following are my questions reformulated.

For some time now I have wondered just what the Kalamazoo Promise promises. I wonder, What does being educated mean for our community? Does an anonymous promise made in Kalamazoo get us educated for free?

Does knowledge come for nothing with a college-framed degree? As I recall from days now gone, experience carried a fee, but now some folks in Kalamazoo claim they'll educate us free in settings where we're never taught to raise our food but to think how smart we'll be.

So do we dare to ask if getting smart changes "un" into "skilled" and if dressing up in suit and tie make those who don't "unskilled"? Does it really show we're wise, thinking wisdom comes unbilled? And just what's up with the con-game, tricking folks to leave the farms, forgetting how to raise their food in the myth of money's charm, thinking that a promise made by faceless folks can ward off hunger's harm?

When we can't afford our rent or pay for gas or food and getting drugs for nothing doesn't mesh with Pfizer's mood, will we then awaken to what The Promise does not include and change our "education plan?" So in the mirror of a later now, we will never have to see starving folks who got "educated free" and were never taught to raise their food but to think how smart they'd be.

Roger Ulrich is a resident of Pavilion Township and farm manager of Lake Village Homestead.