

There's always a chance for redemption

D.G. MARTIN



Sometimes, when I am discouraged about the possibilities of "solving" some of our country's toughest problems, I remember two of my heroes in Charlotte, Mary Carol and George Michie. They taught me that our responsibility to serve others does not end just because we cannot find a quick and simple "solution."

A few months ago, I wrote about them in *Our State* magazine. Just in case you are in need of a little inspiration, I am going to share part of that story with you now.

About the same time that Mary Carol and George, together with their three young children, moved to Charlotte in 1967, Martin Luther King was assassinated. They were anxious about relationships—race relationships. Mary Carol says, "We wanted to do something positive to make a difference."

As Presbyterians, they wanted to join an integrated Presbyterian congregation, if they could find one. They found just one in Charlotte—Seigle Avenue Presbyterian.

Actually Seigle Avenue was a white church that had served Piedmont Courts, a white public housing project. But civil rights laws had forced Piedmont Courts to integrate. When the church opened its doors to blacks, many of its white members left.

When the Michies visited the church, Mary Carol sat beside one of the few blacks attending the service. "I remember taking communion with her and thinking that this is the way it ought to be."

Within a few months, the Michies were mainstays of the struggling church. Their first project, and the one that Mary Carol treasures the most, was a program for the teenagers who lived in Piedmont Courts and the nearby neighborhoods.

First, George and Mary Carol took charge of the "Noble Knights," a group of teenage boys. Then they took on the "Cloud 9" girls club. Each group had about 10 regular members, and soon they were a part of the extended Michie family. They were taking camping trips, organizing sports teams, cooking meals, doing service projects—and making waves.

Mary Carol and George Michie are not the only people to volunteer to mentor a group of teenagers in a poor neighborhood. Teenagers in public housing projects may be our country's toughest challenge—theirs may be the hardest broken lives to mend. So everyone who

takes on such an assignment deserves our thanks and praise.

What may set the Michies apart is their willingness to stay on task for so long. They have never stopped their work with the members of the Noble Knights and Cloud 9.

More than thirty years after they were teenagers, the club members are still in touch with each other and the Michies.

"At weddings and funerals," Mary Carol says, "they will all be there, sitting together on the front row."

Most of these club members have built good lives—with families and solid jobs. Some have struggled. Some are still struggling. But Mary Carol and George never give up on any of them.

Almost twenty years ago, a man, who had been a favorite of Mary Carol's when he was a child, broke her heart when she learned that he had been arrested for murder.

As Mary Carol left the jail after her first painful visit she remembers thinking, "Is this the same child who came to church early on Saturday morning to help me clean? The same child who quietly came into worship the Sunday before Christmas to give me a gift? The same young man, who as a youth, spoke so eloquently about the meaning of Christmas? Who once talked about his own far away dream to be a youth worker? I remember his occasional temper and moodiness and his difficulty in completing tasks, but my mind cannot fathom his getting a gun and blowing someone away."

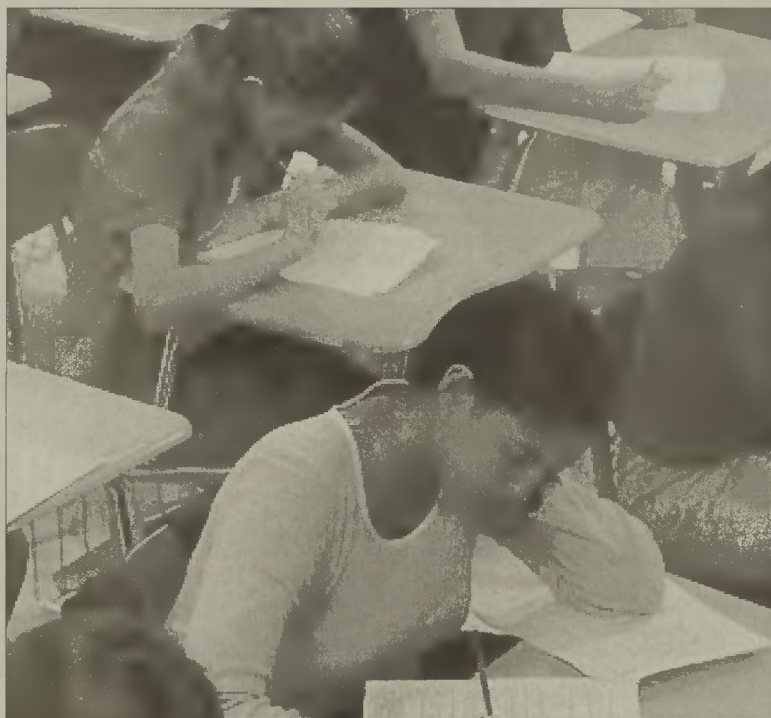
This tragedy led to another avenue of service. Still deeply disappointed, Mary Carol continued to visit him regularly. She went to his trial and after his sentencing kept in touch. This experience prompted Mary Carol and another church member, Ann Bradley, to organize a church group to correspond with prisoners. The members of the prison mission group meet once a month. The members agree only to do two things: write a prisoner regularly, and pray for that prisoner regularly.

At meetings, the group spends about half the time in Bible study and prayer. Then they report to each other about "their prisoners." The outward journey of reaching out to the prisoners, gives the participants an inner spiritual underpinning.

The "success" with prisoners is hard to measure. Some will never leave prison. Not all who do gain freedom will be able to keep their lives turned around.

D.G. MARTIN hosts "North Carolina Bookwatch" on UNC-TV.

POSTSCRIPTS



We're losing legacy of personal achievement



ANGELA LINDSAY

If you went to high school in America, chances are that at some point during your academic career, perhaps in history or civics class, you learned of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. If you went to high school in Charlotte during the '70s, chances are you felt a direct impact of this case via *Swann vs. Board of Education*.

And if you don't recall any of this, here's a recap: in 1954, a Supreme Court decision in *Brown* ordered that public schools be integrated "with all deliberate speed". In 1971, the *Swann* case mandated race-based busing when it became apparent that the speed at which Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools were becoming adequately integrated wasn't deliberate enough.

For decades, *Brown* and its residual cases such as *Swann* were hailed for their pivotal roles in rectifying the wrongs of the "separate but equal" standard in public schools. While many hoped *Brown* would be an impetus for eradicating racial disparity in our educational systems by presenting black youth the opportunity to learn and subsequently compete on a level equal to that of their white counterparts, I am of the opinion that today, fifty years later, it has not.

It seems to me that though the conditions of black schools and the materials black teachers had at their disposal to teach black children during segregation may have been substandard compared to those at white schools, the integrity and pride associated with even being able to get an education was very much intact in the hearts and minds of students. That feeling seems to have seeped through the cracks.

The feeling of community upon which black schools and neighborhoods thrived decades ago is all but gone, mere skeletons now after decades of neglect, urban sprawl and apathy. Such reality brings to mind the old adage: you can't miss what you never had. Many black youth today never experienced the strength of black communities. They never had a reason to respect the tradition of black schools. Education has become an afterthought.

Once upon a time it was commendable, a "personal uplift" I once heard it called, to be studious and proud of it. Nowadays,

finding a black child's nose in a book garners atypical praise (and quite possibly a plethora of ugly names from his peers). The struggle of black youth today is a much different one from yesterday - lunch counter sit-ins and boycotts replaced by gang violence and teen pregnancy. But when so many young black lives are plagued by lack of boundaries, lack of discipline, and lack of morale, are we surprised when an ultimate lack of respect for education ensues?

Inadequate foundations in the personal lives of black youth coupled with the institutionalized harshness of the real world can, and do eat away at the fabric of would-be well-adjusted black youth like so many moths to wool. In many instances, it allows our youth to sit idly by with said wool pulled over their eyes, peering wishfully out of moth-ridden holes only big enough for them to see the mirage of a "bling, bling" rap career or the elusive promise of professional athletics. Case in point: Dom Perignon and Acura Legend. Generally, these two phrases bring to mind relatively luxurious tastes in champagne and automobiles, respectively. Imagine my dismay when, while attending a birthday party at a friend's house years ago, I was informed that the aforementioned luxury items were, in fact, the government names of two African-American boys playing in the corner.

Undoubtedly, the young mother had, at least subconsciously, given her adorable children those horrible names as a testament to the "finer things in life" to which she aspired while the boys' father sat in jail. I wondered about the future of these two boys because, as much as I like to believe that society has finally accepted with equality and respect the ever-growing melting pot that is its racial composition, I am not at all convinced that we are color-blind.

In 20 years, when a job recruiter sees little Dom Perignon's name at the top of a resume, I can only imagine the restraint that recruiter will have to exercise in order to keep from busting at his seams with laughter as he chucks little Dom Perignon's resume into the nearest trash can. He will correctly assume that Dom is a black male and may be less likely to judge him based on his credentials. Like it or not, it is the world in which we live, and some things haven't changed. Now, am I declaring a war on "eccentric" baby names? No. But some things just make sense, and we don't have to make things harder on ourselves or the next generation.

ANGELA LINDSAY is a Charlotte attorney.

The Social Security time bomb

By Michael Tanner
SPECIAL TO THE POST

A few weeks ago, Washington went into one of its periodic spasms of shock and indignation because of Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's comments that Social Security cannot continue to pay its promised level of benefits with its currently projected levels of revenue. Greenspan was not saying anything new. But politicians of every stripe reacted as if he had announced that the sun was about to stand still in the sky.

Now, the Social Security system's trustees have released their latest report on the program's finances and once more reaffirmed the truth of Greenspan's statements. In doing so, the trustees offer us another opportunity for an honest debate about how to reform Social Security and ensure that our children and grandchildren will have the opportunity for a safe, secure retirement.

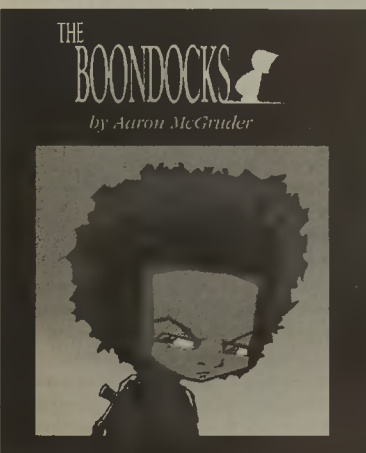
The Trustees confirm that Social Security will begin to run a deficit by 2018, just 14 years from now, and the same date as in last year's report. Thus, while politicians dithered and tried to pretend the issue would go away, we moved another year closer to disaster. But the truly frightening numbers are found further into the report, and make clear the magnitude of the fiscal train wreck awaiting us.

The figure most cited in the media is the "present value" of Social Security's unfounded liabilities, \$3.7 trillion, which represents the amount needed to cover shortfalls after the Trust Fund is exhausted in 2042. An additional \$1.5 trillion would be needed to redeem the bonds in the trust fund, for a total unfounded liability of \$5.2 trillion, on a present value basis. Present value calculations are an important number for economists and actuaries—they show the amount the government would have to set aside today (assuming it earned standard interest rates) to pay all promised benefits in the future. But, of course, the government cannot set aside \$5.2 trillion today. That would be nearly half of our Gross Domestic Product.

Therefore, a better measure of Social Security's financial crisis is its actual cash deficit: the total amount that its expenditures will exceed its revenue from 2018 on. Measured in constant 2004 dollars, that shortfall is an astounding \$26 trillion — \$26,000,000,000,000.00.

To put this in context, in 2018, the first year that Social Security will run a cash deficit, that shortfall will be approximately \$16 billion, or roughly the equivalent of the current budgets for Head Start and the WIC nutritional program. In another two years, Social Security's shortfalls will nearly exceed those two programs, plus the Departments of Education, Commerce, Interior, and the Environmental Protection Agency. By 2030 or so, you can throw in the Departments of Energy, Housing and Urban Development, and Veterans Affairs. And the biggest deficits would be still to come.

MICHAEL TANNER is director of the Project on Social Security Choice at the Cato Institute, www.cato.org.



To the Reader:
Due to a publication error, the following installment of this feature, which was originally slated for October 3, 2004, is running today.
We apologize for the inconvenience.

