

## Opinion

The fabric of Bertie County since 1832

## Rewarding bad behavior...

Somewhere today, there will be breaking news that a well-known and/or powerful person has been accused of abusing an employee, co-worker or romantic partner. So, here's the question: Did their bad behavior only start after they became well-known or powerful?

It seems much more likely to me that they didn't become abusers when they became powerful, but that they became powerful because they were abusers.

Think about it – isn't the most conniving, evil, creepy, abusive back-stabber in your workplace the one who's most likely to get promoted? Isn't the guy or gal who takes credit for your work, who cuts corners, who breaks the rules and sucks up to the bosses the most likely to skip a grade?

If this is true, then serial abusers are more likely to climb the corporate ladder, the church hierarchy or the military ranks than their more worthy co-workers. How else to explain the college bribery scandal – not to mention the political scandals, church scandals, corporate scandals and Hollywood scandals that are all happening at the same time? How is it that so many ethically challenged people have risen to the top of the heap over the good and decent



**JIM MULLEN**  
It Takes A Village Idiot

ones?

Cream no longer rises to the top. At best, it's tolerated down at the bottom. After all, somebody has to do the work while the abusers focus on getting ahead.

So often we hear about famous, powerful people making life miserable for everyone who works for or near them that it's easy to think that it's just a few people at the top of the news-making pyramid who are behaving badly. Really? Isn't it much more likely that the same thing is happening right around the corner at the local fast-food franchise or chain store? The same thing is happening in those workplaces: The abusers will be rewarded by becoming division managers so they can spread fear and loathing further and further afield.

It's not that no one notices. The abusers' employees all know. But their wives never know; their bosses never know. Their equals never know. They are all shocked when the news comes out. "He seemed so nice!" Sure, he was – to the people he needed. The rest? Not so much.

There's an old saying that says if you can't handle a child at 6, you won't be able to handle them at 16. The same is true of abusers. They'll abuse at the lowest level of the totem pole as well as the highest. Rich or poor, there's always a man who calls every waitress "honey," "darlin'" or "sweetheart." If you call him on it, he'll say, "What are you so mad about? I'm being nice." No, you're being passive-aggressive and condescending. That same guy wouldn't call the men in his life "honey." He knows they wouldn't put up with it.

"What about women, then? Are you saying they're all saints?" Not at all. But as my dad used to say, "Two wrongs don't make a right." Maybe women are just not as good at being conniving, evil, back-stabbing and creepy as men. The proof? Why are there so few women running Fortune 500 companies? Why are there are so few women in the Senate? Do I even have to mention the church hierarchies? How has that all-male bastion been working out?

In short, why do we seem hell-bent on rewarding all the wrong people? What is wrong with us? We can all be jerks sometimes, but I wouldn't want to do it for a living.

Oh, yeah, I forgot. I kinda do.

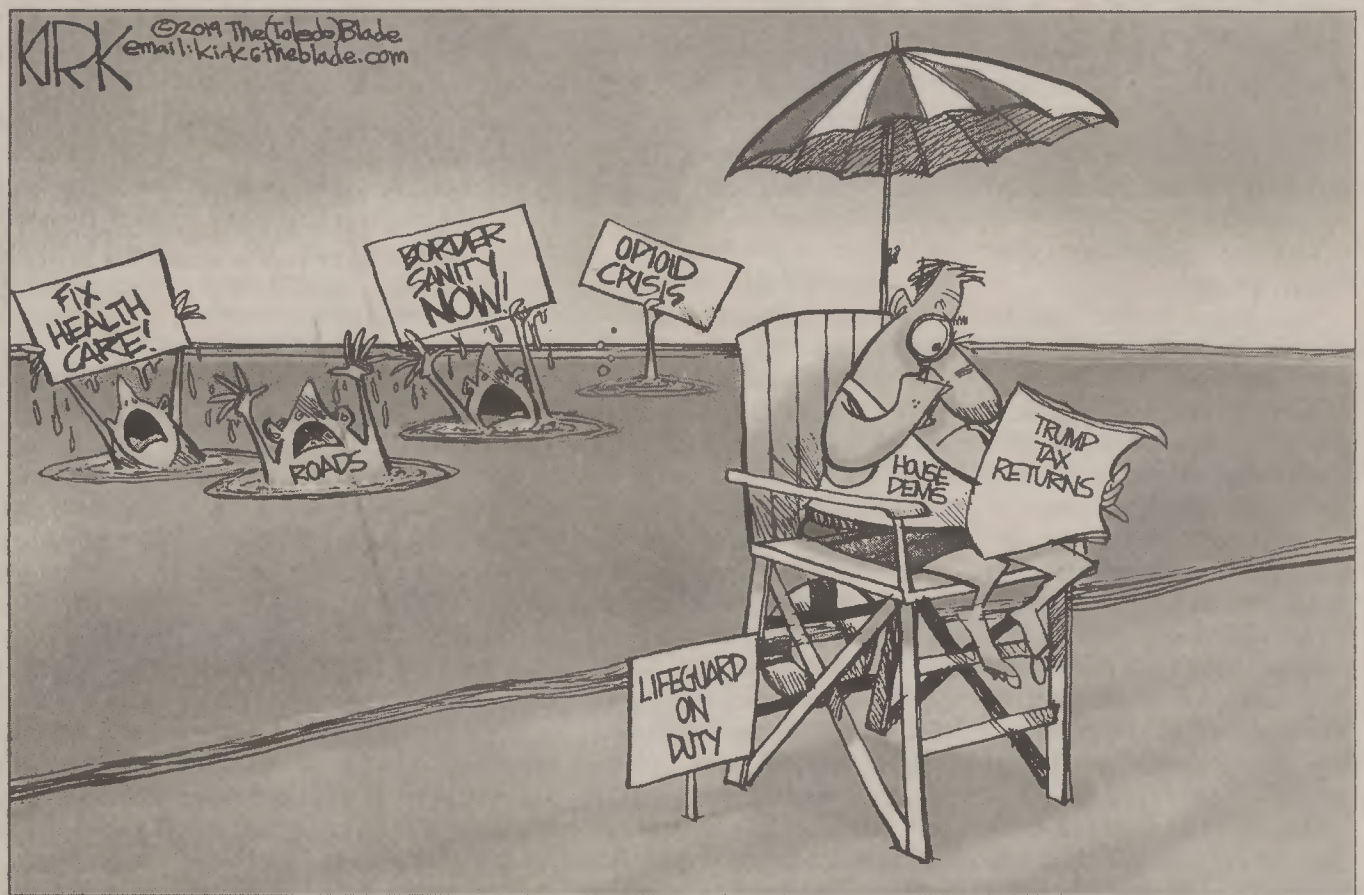
*Jim Mullen is the author of It Takes a Village Idiot: A Memoir of Life After the City. His column, The Village Idiot, takes a look at the curiosities of American life.*

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## Loneliness is a concern...

It seems we have reached an epic level of loneliness in America. Social media has had a profound affect on relationships and the way we interact - or don't - with other people.



**DEBORAH GRIFFIN**  
Farm Wife  
Life

So much so there is now a booming market for "artificial human companions."

We are connected now, more than ever, yet we are more isolated than ever.

It seems like the cartoon, The Jetsons, was not as far-fetched as it seemed.

If you did not grow up in the 1970's - you might not know George Jeston.

George was the patriarch of a futuristic family, complete with their talking dog, Astro. They heavily rely on Rosie, the Jetsons' household robot, to clean, sometimes parent and even dispense medicine.

In a recent New York Times article entitled "Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good," Nellie Bowles asserts that the poor and the elderly are growing more dependant on technology, while the

very rich shun it.

"The rich have grown afraid of screens," she writes.

"They want their children to play with blocks and tech-free private schools are booming. Living without a phone for a day, quitting social networks and not answering email has become a status symbol," Bowles continues.

"Human contact is becoming a luxury good. The richer you are, the more you spend to be off screen," she concludes.

Care.Coach is leading the industry in digital pets. They proudly boast they are "pioneering a game-changing innovation for aging and geriatric care that leverages the best of both human and technological capabilities."

Bowles writes of Mr. Langlois, 68, who lives in a low-income senior housing complex. His best friend, Sox the cat, lives on a tablet.

Sox talks to him about his favorite team, plays his favorite songs and shows him pictures from his wedding. And because she has a video feed of him in his recliner, she chastises him when she catches him drinking soda instead of water.

Langlois is aware that Sox is not real. He knows she is operated by workers around the world who

are watching, listening and typing out her responses.

"But her consistent voice in his life has returned him to his faith," said Bowles.

Langlois told her, "She's brought my life back to life."

The article explains that Sox, a simple animation, barely moves or emotes, and the voice is as harsh as a dial tone. But little animated hearts come up around her sometimes, and Langlois admits he loves when that happens.

Bowles explains the technology behind Sox is quite simple: a Samsung Galaxy Tab E tablet with an ultrawide-angle fisheye lens attached to the front. None of the people operating the avatars are in the United States; they mostly work in the Philippines and Latin America.

"If they say, 'I love you,' we'll say it back," said Victor Wang, the 31-year-old founder and chief executive Care.Coach. "With some of our clients, we'll say it first if we know they like hearing it."

This all seems a bit disturbing and makes me wonder where our future is headed.

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## A good brain zapping...

One of the challenges of middle age is a memory that fizzles in and out like a radio station with a weak signal.



**JANET STORM**  
The Daily Reflector

Some days are frustratingly full of unanswered questions. Where did I park my car? Why did I walk into the living room? Who was I supposed to call after lunch? What happened to the pen I had in my hand three minutes ago?

Until now, the best hope for the middle-aged brain seemed to be writing things down on sticky notes and plastering them in spots where they cannot be missed.

I have personally used this method for several years. Still, there are times when no sticky notes are at hand, and going to fetch them turns into another trip down no-memory lane.

Luckily, science is working on the problem. As reported by The Associated Press, a study has found a specific brand of treatment can improve a form of memory enough that people older than 60 performed like people in

their 20s.

Here's the problem — the treatment is zapping people's brains with electricity.

The report actually specifies it is a "mild electrical current." Still, anyone who has ever seen a science fiction movie can probably draw to mind an image of brain zapping that seems less than benign.

I have to admit I am a bit curious about why brain zapping was on the table in the first place. Is there no one out there who can develop a nice, safe memory pill, preferably coated in chocolate?

Hooking electrodes to someone's head seems like a last-resort measure to me. Sort of a "Hey, you know what might be funny? Zapping a bunch of 60-year-olds' brains. They can't remember if they turned on the dryer or where they left their cellphone — they probably won't recall this particular treatment either."

According to a report published in the journal Nature Neuroscience, the treatment is aimed at "working memory," the ability to hold information in mind for a matter of seconds as you perform a task, such as doing math in your head, taking medications, paying bills or buying groceries.

Electrical current was administered through a tight-fitting cap that also monitored each subject's brainwaves. For study participants, that current felt like a slight tingling, itching or poking sensation under the electrodes for about 30 seconds. After that, the skin got used to the current and it was imperceptible, according to the study's author.

I have my doubts. For one thing, a tight-fitting cap would play havoc with my hairstyle. More importantly, I would like to get a more specific description than "slight tingling" for what subjects experienced. More than once, I have had people in the medical profession tell me a treatment would cause "mild discomfort" when in fact it turned out to be a major pain. I'm looking at you, Mr. Tetanus shot.

The report actually said that more research would be needed. I support that notion. Before anyone gets near my head with electricity, I would like to know all other options have been exhausted.

Get to work on that chocolate pill, science. Or point me to where I left my sticky notes.

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