

OPINION

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6B OMAHA DAILY HERALD FOUNDED 1865 OMAHA DAILY WORLD FOUNDED BY GILBERT M. HITCHCOCK, 1885 OMAHA WORLD-HERALD FIRST PUBLISHED JULY 15, 1889

LAYAWAY SANTAS

Anonymous generosity is inspiring

Every Christmas there are stories of generosity — the donations to Goodfellows, the Salvation Army, the Open Door Mission and other charities across the Midlands and the country. Midlanders are particularly giving, opening their hearts and their wallets to the friendless, the elderly, the young and the needy.

Sometimes, however, there are stories of such spontaneous goodwill that they touch the soul of everyone who hears them.

This one happened in Omaha. And in Detroit, in Missoula, Mont., in Pittsburgh and in cities across the United States. But time and again in Omaha.

These stories of such spontaneous goodwill touch the soul of everyone who hears them.

At one time, many stores offered what was called “layaway,” allowing the not-so-prosperous to choose what they wanted and pay toward the total while the store

held the merchandise. It was particularly helpful to the working poor.

But times changed, credit cards came and layaway declined. Now, in an uncertain economic climate, it returned full-force to Kmart and a few other stores.

What’s different is that, in this season of celebration, some strangers stepped up to pay for others’ layaway purchases, particularly layaways whose buyers were behind on their payments and not likely to catch up by Christmas Day. Particularly layaways involving toys for the children of impoverished parents.

Most of the donors have done their giving secretly, according to an Associated Press report.

Dona Bremser, an Omaha nurse, was at work when a Kmart employee called to tell her that someone had paid off the \$70 balance of her layaway account, which held nearly \$200 in toys for her 4-year-old son. “It made me believe in Christmas again,” she said.

Dozens received similar calls this season.

In Missoula, one man spent \$1,200 to pay down balances for six customers. Store employees reached one at Seattle Children’s Hospital, where her son was being treated. “She was yelling to the nurses, ‘We’re going to have Christmas after all!’” the store manager recounted.

This is the kind of anonymous generosity that has been promoted in recent years by the “random acts of kindness” movement, which encourages people to do something nice for someone else without expecting credit or gratitude.

This is the kind of generosity that inspires others to be spontaneously open-hearted, to step up and help, to give in the spirit of the season and in the wholehearted spirit of charity.

Perhaps that would be the best outcome of all, if an overflowing handful of anonymous layaway Santas galvanizes even more kindly generosity in the coming year.

BOB GIBSON

Baseball legend worthy of statue

“One writer asked me a few days ago, what did I want to be remembered as, and I thought about it and I said: ‘I want to be remembered as a person, a competitor, that gave 100 percent every time I went out on the field.’”

— Bob Gibson, during his induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame on Aug. 2, 1981.

Sarpy County hopes to put a statue of former big-league pitcher Bob Gibson near the Werner Park entrance to honor the baseball legend who has lived in the county for 40 years.

It would be tough to find a better subject for bronze.

Sarpy County Attorney Lee Polikov, who is overseeing the planning effort, said the tribute at the Omaha Storm Chasers ballpark would honor the Omaha native who pitched for the St. Louis Cardinals, and his journey to overcome illness, poverty and racial prejudice. It would include plaques with historical information about Gibson, including his Creighton University athletic career.

The Hall of Famer and one-time Harlem Globetrotter is a five-time winner of 20 games in a season, a nine-time All-Star, two-time World Series most valuable player, National League MVP, nine-time Gold Glove Award winner, two-time Cy Young winner and a member of Major League Baseball’s All-Century team.

As the Hall of Fame says in his biography, Bob Gibson was “one of the best athletes to ever play the game,” a player who “established himself as the very definition of intimidation, competitiveness and dignity.”

There may be only one question to ask about the statue plans: Is 8 feet tall enough?



THE PUBLIC PULSE

Driving distractions are deadly

With so much discussion about whether cellphone use should be illegal for drivers, I think people have lost sight of the real issue — all distracted driving.

Some argue that passage of a law against cellphone use while driving would be an intrusion by government into our private lives. Some argue that passing such a law isn’t necessary because people won’t adhere to it, just as many violate current laws by speeding and drinking and driving.

Some argue that they can safely drive while texting or talking on a cellphone. A 2009 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that 5,574 people were killed on U.S. roadways. Of those, 18 percent involved cellphone use as a distraction.

Although I support a law prohibiting cellphone use while driving, I realize some wouldn’t obey the law. But it would cause most people to think twice. People need to ask if it is worth potentially killing someone or themselves to use a cellphone while driving.

It wasn’t until I asked myself this question — after a friend’s son was killed by a driver who was using a cellphone — that I realized the dangers and the right answer. No phone call is worth a life!

Will Ackerman, Bellevue

Question AG’s funding process

Reports of a donation from the Attorney General’s Office to the Nebraska Farm Bureau’s “We Support Agriculture” campaign have brought to light a practice that we at Common Cause Nebraska find troubling.

It appears that money from settlements in certain cases brought by the Nebraska attorney general can be disbursed at the sole discretion of the attorney general to support activities of groups around the state.

Our concern is not with the worthiness of the recipients. Our concern is with the process. By whom and according to what criteria are grantees deemed worthy?

By what statutory or other authorization does money awarded by courts to the State of Nebraska become a fund for the attorney general to dole out at his sole discretion?

Might this practice further erode public trust in state officials? How, for example, does Bruning’s donation to the politically influential Nebraska Farm Bureau appear to the public in light of his current candidacy for the U.S. Senate?

At a time when budgets are being cut and funds are short, why is the attorney general allowed to sit on \$6 million of public money? We’d like to see the Legislature take a long look at this practice.

Roger Holmes, Lincoln
 Co-president, Common Cause Nebraska

Growing tired of protesters

I agree with Kenneth Larsen’s Dec. 12 letter, “Protesters don’t speak for me.” Those Occupy Wall Street gangs remind me of Vietnam War protesters who received publicity and fame.

Our leaders were so sure those protesters spoke for the taxpayers that they made some pretty stupid decisions that endangered our troops in Vietnam. If our troops had been given what they needed, the outcome would have been swift and sure.

Those same protesters also received more publicity when they jeered our returning troops.

Who supported those protesters? Many looked like college party animals. If I had a child attending college and skipping school, there would have been no more partying.

Many Americans are getting fed up.
 Charlotte Myers, Hamlet, Neb.

Trading food for disarmament?

The provision of food and vitamins to North Korea is ongoing. For all practical purposes, the United States might just as

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well provide military supplies instead of food. Supplying food allows greater resources for the military-industrial complex.

It is our current plan to provide food aid of 240,000 tons of high-protein biscuits and vitamins to North Korea. This new donation would restart nuclear disarmament talks.

Meanwhile, citizens of peaceful countries like Haiti continue to starve or eat only once daily due to natural disasters. Now may be the time to bring this problem to a head and attempt to finalize the Korean War.

James J. Vihstadt Sr., Papillion

Social Security, Medicare funds

Here is a very simple way to prevent Social Security and Medicare from failing:

>> Remove all funds from the “elitist” retirement and health care plans of some in the U.S. House and Senate and place those funds in Social Security and Medicare.

>> Require all present and former House and Senate members to participate in Social Security and Medicare.

I believe the funding problems of both programs would be solved immediately.

A.D. Vinke, Omaha

Find energy alternative to oil

Canada has already ruined too much of its forest land in Alberta. It takes massive mining operations to produce the sludge-like heavy oil that can be refined into fuel. Some who are living near the tar sands are experiencing health problems linked to pollution.

This is the third pipeline permit application being reviewed by the U.S. State Department. Shorter pipelines are envisioned.

Those pipelines would traverse rivers and cross prairies, run on top of vital aquifers and threaten farmers, ranchers and wildlife. Without a doubt, there would be leaks.

We need to look for alternative energy sources. Oil will run out at some point, and so will the jobs. The next thing we will be drilling and hunting for is clean water.

Jean Schmid, Omaha

Keeping candidates on issues

The election process has again dissolved into the ritual of spending ridiculous amounts of money while the candidates avoid discussion of real issues.

So, what if all of the 99-percenters refused to participate in any of the upcoming caucuses and primaries?

If 99 percent just didn’t show up, candidates would not know who the favorite of the week is. They don’t need to know that now, anyway. They do need to know that many of the American people are unhappy and don’t trust them.

If 99 percent keep politicians in suspense about their voting intentions, perhaps the politicians would have to consider the actual issues and focus on constructive solutions.

The real election occurs on Election Day 2012. We don’t need to subject ourselves to

another year of this approach by publicizing our intentions now. A non-vote now could strengthen our vote then.

Iowans could lead the way by demonstrating this power in the next few days.

Theresa McCarthy, Omaha

Nelson showed rural vision

While I don’t agree with everything that U.S. Sen. Ben Nelson has done, there is one thing worthy of note. It is something that has created a lasting legacy of his leadership and love for his state.

That is the effort he put forth as governor to establish the Nebraska Community Foundation. Since its founding, the NCF’s assets have climbed to almost \$70 million. The NCF has more than 212 affiliated funds across the state that wouldn’t exist if not for Sen. Nelson’s efforts.

Last year, according to the annual report, the NCF made grants totaling more than \$20 million. Go to the NCF website (www.nebcommfound.org) to see the impact of Nelson’s decision to establish the foundation.

Edmund J. Leslie, Waterloo, Neb.

Coordinate Omaha traffic lights

A Dec. 19 news story was interesting. It was about Council Bluffs looking into coordinating traffic signals on the Veterans Memorial Highway to help with traffic control.

For a long time, I have wondered why this isn’t done in Omaha. Traveling east and west in downtown Omaha is a joke.

With traffic signals on every corner, you barely get onto the gas pedal before you have to brake for the next red light. You barely get to a stop and the light turns green. You’re off again to do the same thing for the next eight blocks.

Laura McCoy, Omaha

No seat belts on school buses

While driving on a country gravel road, I approached an intersection and a school bus turned in front of me loaded with kids.

As I followed the bus, I couldn’t believe my eyes. There were kids standing in the aisle, running from one end of the bus to the other and chasing each other.

I followed the bus all of the way to my grandson’s driveway and waited for it to turn around in front of me.

Later, my grandson told me school buses do not have seat belts. How do we require seat belts in cars but let 30 or 40 children ride on a school bus without a seat belt?

Erie Safford, Omaha

Finding the joy of Christmas

Christmas is the best time of year, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus and remember He was the newborn King. It’s a day to focus on all He’s done for us and remember that if it weren’t for Him, we would never be.

It’s too bad that Christmas decorations are in stores by Halloween and children are already telling everyone what they want for Christmas, as if it were their birthday.

It seems like many adults are waiting for Christmas to be over by November. We used to wait until a week or two before Christmas to hang the stockings, put up the tree and sing Christmas carols. Oh, what fun it was! Little things meant a lot.

Now, we want big things that mean little. This year, let’s put Christ back into Christmas and celebrate His birth as never before.

Let’s remember Jesus is the reason for the season, and not our children, who have everything and still want more. Think of our loved ones who have passed away and are spending Christmas with Jesus this year, and try to be happy for them.

May God bless everyone this Christmas.
 Yvonne Heiden, Fremont, Neb.