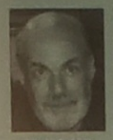
COMMENTARY

Rash of brazen break-ins shocks residents, officials



ROUSE'S POINT
By John Rouse

What's happening in Bowie these days is criminal. Literally.

I couldn't believe my eyes last week when I spotted, several days in a row, an armed guard leaning against a wall in front of the Bank of America branch at Hilltop Plaza. Odd, I thought. A bank employee acknowledged the guard, though the reasons proffered for him being in place were more than a tad vague.

But my trepidation over a gun-toting doorman at a Route 450 shopping center was mightily eclipsed by incidents in several of the city's subdivisions.

Late one recent night, a man was snoozing on his couch when a burglar entered his house. Fortunately, nothing bad happened and the intruder was scared away. It appears that several homes in various parts of the city were the targets of wandering thieves. They entered through garage windows or jimmied sliding glass doors between late evening and early morning.

In one incident, a resident's surveillance camera snapped the intruder's photo, which has now been circulated far and wide. In the picture, the lout looks stunned.

The incidents were of sufficient magnitude for the city to send out an e-mail through its public safety alert service. City Councilwoman Diane Polangin also passed the warning to her constituents, and I'm told that the e-mail has been flying all over town, forwarded to friends and neighbors by concerned residents. And who wouldn't be concerned about incidents like this? It all turns me dyspeptic.

Councilwoman Geraldine Valentino-Smith, whose Long Ridge neighborhood was targeted by burglars last week, exclaimed: "Bowie will not tolerate such criminal behavior. Our verbal commitment to public safety must now transcend into reality with a coordinated and sophisticated approach to preventing, deterring and solving such intrusive criminal activity." Well said.

The city dispatched members of the police department to caution residents about the rash of break-ins. That's what community policing is all about and precisely why we elected to establish a city police department, one resident said. "We never got service like that from the county." Indeed.

Concerned Mayor Fred Robinson commented: "The past several months have seen an increase in reported cases of crime, particularly home burglaries. Fortunately, the Bowie Police Department has made a strong and forceful effort to coordinate information and police resources and to inform neighborhoods affected by these offenses, and they have initiated inquires to determine just how many reports the county police department has documented in our city, how many of those cases they have been assigned for follow-up investigation, how many of those cases have been successfully closed, and how many remain open. The latter group clearly represents serious concern."

While burglary is defined as a crime against property, it can be much more serious. Recent comments from the mayor, accurately in my view, noted that "one of our most serious concerns related to late-night burglaries of owner-occupied homes is that the incident can easily and quickly escalate if a burglary victim is awakened by the criminal and either the victim or the suspect adds a firearm into this serious matter." That's for sure.

I was stunned one recent evening when I was flipping through TV channels and spotted a Bowie item on Fox TV. Teenagers had been robbing other teens in broad daylight at Bowie Town Center. The story topped Fox's news show. Police Chief Katherine Peres said the incidents may not have been quite as dramatic as Fox implied, but she conceded that there is a goodly amount of crime at the city's largest shopping center. She was interviewed by Fox, and she cautioned people not to leave items in cars — an open invitation to theft.

The chief told me that recently she spotted a purse in clear view in a vehicle parked at a local church. She had the owner located and warned her about doing that sort of silly thing. The woman was aghast, exclaiming indignantly that she was parked in a church lot. I guess she thought God was watching over her purse. Thefts from cars parked in church lots are nothing new in Bowie. Churches are not sacred ground for crooks, for heaven's sake.

Robinson correctly opined that perhaps we in Bowie have been sheltered over the years. We know from news reports that crime is all around us. It is not unique to any community. It appears, not unlike the infamous cockroach, almost everywhere. We have tried to ignore it. The city has tried to deal with it. We have even declared war on it. But, like the pesky insect, it seems to grow in spite of the city's best intentions.

I couldn't agree more. The county public relations spinners like to issue toe-curling pronouncements that crime is decreasing. Yeah, sure it is, Mr. PR flack. The county can fiddle its statistics any way it wants.

But kids walking in a neighborhood during the day are assaulted and robbed by other youths — that's something recent. Not too long ago an elderly woman was attacked and her purse stolen in broad daylight at a local fast-food joint. I don't recall incidents like that in the past. More and more stores are being robbed, thefts from vehicles and houses are becoming as common as the house fly, to continue with the mayor's insect analogy. It's depressing.

It is clear that the city's efforts to create a police department have proven to be prophetic, despite the opposition of the city's perennial naysayer crowd. They were wrong. The city's decision to move forward was motivated by failures on the part of the county to place appropriate levels of law enforcement resources in this community. Without our city police, the crime would be worse.

Robinson adds: "This current rise in local crime is a matter of serious concern. We cannot and should not ignore it. We must demand the city police department respond to these changing conditions quickly and efficiently. We must demand that city and county police officials work together in common interest to discourage crime. We must demand that the police undertake every effort possible to inform the community of threats, how to prevent or reduce the possibility of crime, and to identify, arrest, and successfully prosecute offenders."

I know the city police department is making notable progress under the very able leadership of Chief Perez and her deputy, John Nesky. These two top cops are in touch with their public. There's increasing police visibility, improved response times to reported crimes and a much more localized effort to engage with the community. But, and this is very important, the job is not done. Yes, they are making progress, but as the department grows it will have to demonstrate an ability to peel off quality officers dedicated to traffic enforcement and local investigation of crimes like the recent brazen burglaries.

Patience is a virtue, but if this spate of crime continues to get our attention, police and city officials, particularly the mayor and the City Council, will need to bolster the momentum of moves to a higher level of public safety. It's a challenge, but the commitment and the resources are there. The question I have is just how quickly the Bowie police can evolve to a full-time, full-service department with the talents and skills to anticipate problems and have all the necessary resources to prevent or respond to those challenges. The city can't waste time.

The writer is the retired editor of this newspaper.

Readers' views

Gail Thayer

It was 10 years ago this week that a drunk driver took the life of Gail Thayer. He crashed into her car as she sat waiting to make a left turn from the southbound lanes of Route 301. He was found guilty of vehicular manslaughter and served nearly 10 years in prison.

Gail's memory and spirit live on in our community. Her spirit is there whenever anyone makes a conscious choice not to drink and drive. We never know when we may have saved a life when we give someone else the keys, or take the keys from someone we know should not get behind the wheel. It sometimes takes the courage of our convictions to make that stand and many have. We cannot help but wonder if others have taken strength from their memories of the tragedy that rocked our community 10 years ago, then stood up and said "no." If you did, we thank you in her name — you may have saved a life.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving gave our family tremendous support during our grief and recovery period following Gail's loss. They provided multiple support services but were especially helpful acting as our advocates during the legal process that led to the conviction. Their Victim's Assistance program provided much needed professional support as we went through the yearlong process to see that justice was served.

In closing we would like to take this opportunity to make you aware of an extraordinary statistic. Since 1980 (The year MADD was formed) alcohol-related traffic fatalities have decreased by about 44 percent from around 30,000 per year to just over 17,000 annually. MADD estimates that they have helped save over 300,000 lives. We would like to thank MADD for their tireless and incredibly effective efforts by making a donation in the name of Gail Thayer, and we ask all those who read this to consider doing the same. Please visit their Web site at MADD.org and follow the prompts to make a donation in Gail's name. While the number of fatalities is going down the statistics still show that every 39 seconds someone dies in an alcohol-related traffic accident. There is still much work to do.

GAIL THAYER FAMILY
Bowie

Jimmy Carter

Norman Hendrickson's recent stinging criticism of Jimmy Carter's recent peace initiatives made me wonder whether the general public was really getting sufficient information on the intricate issues that impact on today's world. Since I claim no expertise on foreign policy matters, I will only confine my comments on that part of a recent letter which states that Carter has partially redeemed himself after his presidency, but only as a carpenter.

I surmise that Hendrickson was referring to Carter as a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, helping to construct homes for the destitute and elderly.

Jimmy Carter, however, is a man of many seasons. He has admitted that peanut farming made the greatest impact on his life until his 1941 graduation from high school. It was this experience that made him a benefactor to a struggling farmer in China.

In the mid-1980s, the World Bank sent me on missions to China to assess the benefits derived by people from bank-assisted development projects. On one such visit, accompanied by an interpreter, I was invited by a farmer to his modest home and was surprised to see newspaper photos of Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn, his wife, adorning the walls. Upon my inquiry, the farmer replied that Carter had also visited his farm and, in fact, taught him some techniques of peanut farming. The farmer also learned of varieties more conducive to production of peanut butter, thus increasing his income from this cash crop.

When I returned from that trip, I wrote Jimmy Carter conveying the Chinese farmer's appreciation of his visit to his farm. The former president wrote back, saying that he had fond memories of his encounter with the farmer, and even recalling the name of the county where the farm was located.

Perhaps wistfully, Jimmy Carter in one of his books revealed that none of their children or grandchildren have farming in their blood. The former president's heartstrings, however, are rooted in the land which yields bounty. He remains confident that the earth will continue to shape the lives of the people who own it.

PASTOR B. SISON
Bowie

Cyanobacteria

My husband and I recently traveled to New England and stopped in Meredith, N.H., at Lake Winnapausaukee for one night. It is truly a beautiful lake and the water appeared crystal clear. On the way to the beach area, we passed a sign that warned of cyanobacteria. We inquired at the hotel desk and were assured that the water had been tested by the New Hampshire Department of the Environment and was now safe for recreational usage. We observed at least 15 other people, adults and children, in the water. We went swimming that afternoon and washed off shortly after.

The following day, after checking out of our pricey waterfront hotel, we decided to use the recreational facilities once more and went kayaking, before continuing on our travels. This time I did not wash off my legs, which were exposed to the water from the knees down. Two days later I awoke with a rash of red blister-like bumps that itched, mostly covering my lower legs. As I am fair-skinned, I was apparently more sensitive than my spouse. Upon my return home, I went to the emergency room of a local hospital and was treated with prednisone and released. The local doctor was puzzled by the rash and was not sure how to treat it, so she contacted poison control. They contacted me at home two days later to check up on me.

After researching cyanobacteria on the Internet, I learned that it is a natural and needed bacteria in our local waterways, but at certain times of the year during algae blooms it produced cyanotoxins that can poison and kill animals and humans. Cyanobacteria can cause gastrointestinal illness and skin and mucous irritation and damage, and can cause liver, kidney and neurological damage. I also learned that four other lakes in New Hampshire have been closed due to evidence of cyanobacteria in the waterways. Apparently, Maryland does not even have a monitoring system for its rivers and lakes and there have been incidents of algae blooms in the Chesapeake Bay and tributaries. The water does not have to appear scummy green or smell bad to have it.

I am sharing this personal experience, not only to caution those who may plan to vacation to the lake areas of New Hampshire this summer, but also to alert to the fact that our local waterways can also be a source of cyanobacteria and can have serious health implications for family members, especially children and pets, who may actually ingest the water.

NANCY KAUFMAN
Bowie

Home-style Home Plate

Ninety-two-year-old senior citizen Billie Arnett called me Thursday, July 24, to tell me of the significant mention made by the *Blade-News* editor of the missing of Home Plate restaurant, formerly located in the Bowie Plaza Shopping Center, which was run by a former pastor. The editor's statement that "the greens there were truly a religious experience," mirrors expressions that I hear from past customers. They also say they miss the catfish and curried goat.

Since closing last September, it has been heartwarming to meet so many who expressed appreciation for Home Plate and our soul food. They have embraced me to the encouragement that I continue well in the years of retirement.

I am thankful that Home Plate came to be a place where I met people who became friends. As we will meet in sundry Bowie places, we shall greet in joy and continue the greening of the relationship.

ROBERT B. HUNTER
Bowie

Animal shelters

It appears that there exists some interest in Bowie starting its own animal shelter for our strays and runaway dogs. Having volunteered at a few shelters, I am somewhat familiar with their operations. I would be willing to start looking into this on behalf of the city of Bowie, or be willing to assist if someone already has the ball rolling. I have set up an e-mail account, bowieanimalshelter@gmail.com for anyone who is interested in discussing this possibility.

TARA KELLEY BAKER
Bowie

Religion in schools still an interesting, yet touchy, issue

DEVLIN'S VIEW
By Gerard Devlin

National polls show that some Americans believe in some strange things. Twelve percent of us believe that Joan of Arc was, in fact, the wife of Noah. You have to wonder who those people are. Even in the letters to this newspaper, and there are some odd ball views, nobody to my knowledge has taken this particular view. I have long waited to point out that there is a "k" in ark and a "c" in Arc. Alas in vain as I have never met a representative of this group whom the philosophers describe as the truly invincibly ignorant.

It is easy to dismiss such folks as boobs, as H.L. Mencken used to do, without finding yourself in the elitist class. It is easy if you are part of the upper 88 percent to adopt a smug notion of intellectual superiority.

More difficult though is to make something of the fact that a majority of Americans reject, in toto, the notion of evolution. Thirty-three percent believe the halfway post is that there was evolution but that it was directed by the divinity. That is a creationist position.

Only 14 percent take their Darwin in an unleavened form. The arguments that raged in the 19th century when *The Origin of Species* was first published are still being echoed today even in the columns of the *Blade-News*.

I am fairly certain that this article will produce a response in the form of an angry letter or a comment in the blogs. There are certain issues which inevitably strike a nerve among our vast readership spread all the way from Allen Pond as far as Fox Hill Lake.

My favorite critic in the blog world was the one who was upset by something I had written for this paper but found his outrage tempered by the fact that when he appeared before me in a traffic case in the District Court, Upper Marlboro, I had found him not guilty of whatever traffic law he had been accused of breaking. That, of course, is another story.

Perhaps equally disturbing is the fact that the Supreme Court is accused falsely of having taken God out of the school curriculum because weak-kneed school administrators have accepted this erroneous notion along with a national majority. There is an important distinction between teaching about religion which is acceptable and teaching religion which is not.

A perceptive legal commentator noted that as long as there are math tests the little Marys and Johnnies will bring God into the halls of academic as testees seek divine aid to make up for their lack of a more consistent attitude towards competing homework assignments.

Be that as it may, those who make school policy have decided that the best way to stay out of trouble is to keep religion totally outside of the class. This may not be what the courts require but it still does to those who fear a policy which results in some kind of impact.

What this has resulted in is to quote Stephen Prothero, head of the Department of Religion at Boston University, in his acclaimed *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* to the effect that we as a nation "are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion."

A year or so ago, Randall Balmer wrote an excellent article in the Washington Monthly titled "Why Johnny Can't Quote Scripture and Why it Matters" which is very much worth reading. His inspiration was the work by Prothero cited above.

Balmer notes that a significant number of high school students think that, like Brad and Angelina, Sodom and Gomorrah were actually married to each other and that the Sermon on the Mount was actually given by evangelist Billy Graham rather than the Galilean.

Recently I read where there are some folks critical of the growth of the immigrant population who say that "if they want to be Americans then they ought to speak English because after all Jesus spoke in English." If it's good enough for Jesus it ought to be mandatory for Juan and Pedro is their view.

Curiously enough, America, which is the most religious of the industrial nations, is also a nation of religious illiterates which is odd because only a couple of generations ago knowledge of the *Bible*, and especially the King James version, and yes Shakespeare, were shared by almost all literate persons in the two great English-speaking nations and I emphasize that I am using the word literate not educated. The idea that everyone should aspire to a university education is very much a post-World War II idea in the United States which came about as a result of the Veteran's Readjustment Act of 1944, the GI Bill, and after that in the United Kingdom where it is very much a work in progress.

Religion in the school is an interesting issue. Some want a larger sphere returning to an era when America was much more homogenous and there was a relatively commonly shared view on religion. Others of course, want less or even none, and bridle at the notion that God can be mentioned in classrooms and argue a separation of church and state that no court has ever mandated. It seems clear that the center is not holding.

The writer is a former state [illegible], retired judge and longtime [illegible] and civic activist.

LGL