

In Real Life

THE DAILY WORK OF AMERICANS



SPECIALLY ILL-EDUCATED

By T. Kelly Rossiter

I'm a teacher at my local junior high, but I don't educate. Instead, I watch helplessly as a small group of students wreak havoc. This damage is the result of two well-intentioned federal laws: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975. IDEA seeks to incorporate disabled students into the regular curriculum. Section 504 expands the traditional definition of "disabled." In combination, these laws create a reaction more explosive than anything ever seen in chemistry class.

Suddenly, students with a very loosely defined set of "behavioral difficulties" receive civil rights protection, and can't be disciplined for these "difficulties." Fearing the wrath of parental advocacy groups and their lawyers, schools nationwide have been brought to an educational standstill.

Specifically, IDEA states that handicapped students must be placed in the "least restrictive environment," so that, "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled." Placing them in mainstream classrooms has worked many wonders; handicapped children receive the confidence and encouragement they need to maximize their talents, and non-handicapped students benefit from the unique insights handicapped students can provide.

But when I say "handicapped," what image comes to mind? Blind, autistic, epileptic? I can't tell you how many miles I've walked shadowing my charges while they destroy school property, bang on classroom windows, and scream obscenities to both students and staff. These students are not mobility-limited, blind, or mute. No, they're what Section 504 terms "behaviorally disabled," a loose category of students who receive the educational equivalent of diplomatic immunity.

So what constitutes a "behavioral disability"? To quote my district's psychological evaluation form, "Section 504 does not set forth a list of specific diseases and conditions...because of the difficulty in ensuring the comprehensiveness of such a list." Among the general guidelines offered instead: "An inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.... Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances."

Certainly some student misbehavior can be traced to an actual physiological affliction, but most "inappropriate behavior" I see is exhibited by students who have control over their actions.

Section 504 and IDEA have been around since the mid-1970s, so why the sudden turmoil? It's your tax dollars and the legal system hard at work. Parent advocacy groups backed by phalanxes of attorneys and funding from the Department of Education are prodding parents to sue. Many whose children misbehave are more than happy to blame the schools. So you get scenarios like the one in California's Ocean View School District: Jimmy P., a student with a communicative disorder, has a history of attacking students, kicking staff members, and biting teachers. Claiming the school set him up for failure, Jimmy P.'s father refused to allow him to be removed from mainstream classrooms. The school sought an injunction to override his objection. Though the injunction passed in state court, a federal court overruled it, saying the injuries caused by Jimmy were not serious enough to warrant removal.

With courts handing down decisions like these, school districts like mine are loathe to risk a legal battle. Instead, common stop-gap measures to placate parents while preserving the educational environment include providing personal teachers for schooling at home, or individual aides to accompany students throughout the

school day. Both are enormously expensive, and, as my school has discovered, neither one is effective.

I've seen teenagers who failed all their classes because they refused to open a book. Who smashed a picture frame because they "were pissed off." Who told the school principal to "go f---k your slutty mother." Even with an army of aides it's impossible to prevent this behavior, when "behaviorally disabled" students know that no disciplinary measures can be taken. But it's happening now with your tax dollars, in your schools, in the name of civil rights.

According to many of my students, I'm a dumb s---head. But I'm smart enough to recognize that today's special ed. practices are a tragedy. The exorbitant price tag on current special education takes funds away from other worthy students. Mainstream classes are dragged down by classroom chaos. And "behaviorally disabled" students are excused from any responsibility for their actions, on civil rights grounds.

Recently, while trying to talk one of my students I'll call "Mark" down from his desktop perch, where he stood simulating masturbation in front of the class, I heard this explanation: "Don't lecture me. I'm behaviorally disabled, I can't listen to lectures, they make me angry. And I can't control my anger." Neither can I, Mark. Neither can I.

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ART LOVER SURVIVES GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

By Paul A. Cantor

What's an art-lover to do when a feud between the President and Congress shuts down the largest complex of museums in the United States? I had to be in Washington in early November and showed up early to see the highly touted Winslow

Homer and Johannes Vermeer exhibitions at the National Gallery. In recent years my passion for going to museums has begun to border on an addiction. My friends have begun to worry about me, especially after I reported that during a recent trip to Spain I visited 25 museums in 15 days. When you start going to places like the Museum of the Convent of the Royal Barefoot Nuns in Madrid, I suppose your friends do have cause for concern.

When not traveling abroad, I count on the National Gallery to supply my fixes of great art. But this November, I faced a serious conflict between my political and my aesthetic principles. As a political conservative, I took a visceral pleasure in seeing the government shut down, but that meant that I had no hope of getting into the National Gallery. The thought of 21 Vermeers waiting to be looked at but behind locked gates was driving me crazy.

Then I realized I should stop passively depending on the federal government to satisfy my craving. In all my years of going to free blockbuster exhibitions at the National Gallery, I had been neglecting the Phillips Collection. When I called their number, the recorded message proudly proclaimed: "The Phillips Collection, a non-government institution, is open today."

The Phillips turned out to be a shining example of what private initiative can do in the world of the arts. First opened in 1921 by steel heir Duncan Phillips, the institution bills itself as "the first museum of modern art in the United States." Its diverse collection is remarkably high in quality, including one of the most vivid Renoirs I have ever seen, several electric Van Goghs, and one El Greco almost as good as any I saw in Spain. The American collection is a particular tribute to Phillips' taste and includes works by artists he personally patronized, such as Georgia O'Keeffe.

After visiting the Phillips I could not think of any other private museum I had not already seen. Much to my chagrin, I realized I would have to rely on the generosity of foreign governments. The Canadian embassy has a small gallery for mounting exhibitions of its country's artists. This time the embassy was featuring paintings by Cornelius Krieghoff, a nineteenth-century regionalist genre

painter whose work I knew from an exhibition at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

Krieghoff was born a Dutchman, and he painted quaint interiors in loving detail, but I will be the first to admit that he is no Vermeer. Still, I relished the opportunity to see 30 of his works. Relieved that Canadian authorities had not gone on a sympathy strike with their NAFTA trading partner, I decided to test the spirit of hemispheric solidarity and set off for the Art Museum of the Americas, run by the Organization of American States. They had an exhibition of 24 recent paintings by the Japanese-Brazilian artist Tomie Ohtake, a non-representational painter whose sense of color, form, and composition I found impressive.

I then serendipitously stumbled upon the Museum of the American Architectural Foundation in the Octagon House (where President Madison lived after the British burned the White House in the mother of all government shutdowns). This being Washington—where numbers generally are inflated—the Octagon House in fact has only six sides. Of all the museums I visited, it proved to be the most educational. Its exhibition, "The Growth of Early Washington, D.C.: Southern City/National Ambition," could not avoid chronicling a pattern of political ambition and economic overreaching that helps explain why the federal government now finds itself in financial turmoil. For example, one exhibit shows how, in an 1828 effort to win trade away from New York, Washington began building a canal system to Lake Erie. Having borrowed a million dollars from the federal government, the city failed to anticipate that railroads were going to replace canals, and ended up nearly bankrupt.

The public museums of Washington are a national treasure. But we shouldn't forget that those gleaming white marble buildings are monuments to the imperial ambitions of the capital city, its tendency to aggrandize itself at the expense of the rest of the country. If it takes a few museum closings to teach that lesson, then, as painful as it is for me, I will settle for Krieghoffs in place of Vermeers.

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HAUNTED BY THE '60s

By Raymond Wisher

I recently stopped a 14-year-old girl driving a car with no license and a bad tag. When she found out she was being arrested, she started crying and asked, "Is this why they call you pigs?" "No," I answered, "we were called pigs in the '60s by a crowd whose main interests were getting high rather than working, protesting a war their countrymen were dying in, complaining about the government while taking its money, and basically acting like pieces of dirt. The police were trying to maintain some control and peace in society, and for that we were called pigs."

I found out she was driving a group of boys around while they broke into houses. Asked why she did it, she matter-of-factly answered, "I need things." It turned out she was enrolled at Bells, a private, yuppie, alternative school for kids who can't "adjust" to normal school disciplines. They don't ask the kids to excel, just to feel good about themselves. Students only have to attend classes once a week; the rest of the time they work on their own. They have tests, but if the students get things wrong, the teachers let them keep trying until they either get it right or feel good enough about themselves to quit. But I digress.

I'm kinda staring at her. Fourteen years old, and so self-obsessed as to ignore all but her own immediate needs. I asked, "What about the people whose stuff you ripped off? Don't they count? What are they, some kind of food source?" She replied, "What about them?", then brightened up at my "food source" description. I gave up.

It frustrates me that many people seem surprised to see social order slipping. Take any structure supported by several main beams, gnaw away at each of them, and soon the structure will fall. If you water down education, attack the family, scorn religion, undermine the law, what do you think will happen?

The '60s has grown up and bitten us in the ass.

Raymond Wisher is a Florida police detective.

