



First Friday News & Views

Monthly Newsletter of the *First Friday Breakfast Club, Inc.*



April 2022

Volume 27

Issue 4

Next Meeting

April 1

7:00 a.m.



Meeting Location

**Hoyt Sherman Place
15th & Woodland
Des Moines**



April Speaker

**David
Miglin**



FFBC Website

ffbcia.org



Deadline Approaches for Scholarship Donations

by Byron Huff, Board President

Last June, the First Friday Breakfast Club awarded nine **\$4,500 scholarships** due to the generosity of our donors; we cannot do this again without your support. We are nearing the end of our fiscal year for scholarship donations on April 30. If you have not donated since May 1, 2021, I hope you will give it serious consideration.

We have received an unprecedented **36 applications** for the scholarships this year showing not only the need for financial assistance, but for the continued work of these students to advocate for inclusion, to fight homophobia, and to educate their schools and/or communities about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. FFBC contacts every high school in the state of Iowa with a letter and brochure about the scholarship. This year, the committee also compiled a list of every counselor in the state, along with their emails. This allowed us to also send digital versions of our application materials.

These young people have served as an inspiration for their LGBTQ peers – standing up to bullies, fighting through adversity, brushing off judgment, and leading by example. Strong student leaders can often make the difference for LGBTQ students who might struggle at home, in their churches, and in their schools. Our scholars really do show them a better path.

Scholarship requests go through a rigorous scoring process to select the recipients, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity to award those who have distinguished themselves through courageous efforts.



The Board of Directors and committee members put in many hours of work without compensation because we believe in the mission of FFBC. This means that **100%** of your donation goes **directly** to these brave students; not many nonprofits can make that statement.

We are looking forward to an in-person presentation of the scholarships this year on June 3, 2022, in the beautiful art gallery of Hoyt Sherman Place. Please make a donation and plan to join us for this heartwarming event.

**On behalf of myself and our Board, we
sincerely thank you for your considerations!**



Evil

by David Richard Ross



My name is David Richard Ross. My husband, of 43 years, and I have lived in Iowa for most of our lives. We are both retired and lead active lives. We walk for at least thirty minutes every day. We love to travel and have seen a lot of this wonderful world. But I have become aware of a disturbing trend or "a disturbance in the force" if you will.

In the last six years I have been witness to the phenomenon of **evil** growing in the world. This evil has manifested itself in the highest levels of government to the lowest levels of society. It has masked itself in doing good things. It has wrapped itself around the minds of the good doers. This evil has masked itself in many names: My Welfare, My Money, My Way, My Children, Fake News, My Patriotism, and My Security. It has misguided many a good doer down the road to being an agent for that very evil.

This is nothing new. It has happened before. Evil has a pattern of growth that, if you are a skeptic, is easy to spot. Evil will first start with a need for self-importance. Then it invades the mind for money or greed. Once greed has been achieved, it will never go away. It always wants more. The third stage is power, control, and the ability to inflict their will on others. This is the realm of the con-man, the deceiver.

Evil always attracts its own kind: the low self-esteem, the looked down on, and the angry. These people are particularly vulnerable to the attractions of greed and power. Evil will then take them on a ride to achieve these things by any means possible. Compassion, love, and morals have no room in this endeavor.

We, as gay people, in some areas, are still looked down on, shunned, and denied our rights. We must be particularly aware of using hatred, anger, and vengeance as motivation against those we consider our enemies. If we do, evil is not far away. We could become the instrument of evil. So, what are we to do? How are we going to cope with evil so that we don't befall the temptations and become part of evil itself?

The counter to this evil is simple. It is a thought of wisdom spoken over two thousand years ago. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Christ, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have all said it in different ways. Let's not lose the lessons that these great teachers have given us. Stories like the "Good Samaritan," the "Sermon on the Mount," the "I Have a Dream Speech," an "Eye for an Eye Until the Whole Word is Blind," and the "Going Through an Eye of a Needle" story.

Compassion and love for humanity are concepts that will never be evil. Sure, we have to take care of ourselves, but let's not forget our fellow humans. Be thankful for your position in the world. Let compassion and love be your guide. When you talk about or to your perceived enemy, think of those words. Be a good doer.



Thanks to **Ken Hanson** for introducing **Mark Babcock**, our March speaker. Thanks to **David Cotton** for managing our website and to **Nicholas Williams** for managing all of our Microsoft IT infrastructure. Thanks to **Wade Petersen** for his work as our newsletter editor. *Thank you to all our contributors to the newsletter!*

The **deadline** for the **May newsletter** will be **April 18**. If you have something on your mind to share, type it up and email it to Wade (wadecpetersen@gmail.com) by the copy deadline.

A special thank-you to those FFBC members and friends who have chosen to designate FFBC through the **Donor Direct** program of **United Way**. The contributions through United Way are tax deductible. Those who have chosen this means of supporting FFBC have gone to the trouble of completing their United Way campaign worksheet by designating FFBC as the beneficiary of their generosity. FFBC is an eligible recipient of such funding designations.



United Way

Thanks also to all those **Amazon shoppers** who designate FFBC as the beneficiary when shopping **smile.amazon.com**. Your shopping with



smile.amazon.com means that a small contribution to FFBC will be made with every purchase. Proverbial, found money.

Our fundraising efforts are ongoing to fund our scholarship program. To date we have raised over **\$450,000** for scholarships that are awarded to Iowa high school seniors who have done remarkable, courageous things to reduce homophobia and teach about LGBTQ issues in their schools and communities. Please consider a tax-deductible **contribution online** or by sending a check.

Please consider a **tax-exempt testamentary gift**. Our first legacy gift to the FFBC scholarship program came from **Cliff Paulsen** to the tune of over **\$67,000!** Contact **Byron Huff** for details or with questions.



A Board of Education Education

by Jonathan Wilson

Serving for twelve years on the Des Moines School District Board of Education, on the National School Boards Association Board of Directors, and as chair of the Council of Urban Boards of Education, all proved to be a remarkable education for me. I was originally prompted to run for election to the school board because of my commitment to quality, public education as the foundation of a viable democracy, and my conviction that our public schools were being underfunded. I still have that commitment and, despite twelve years of lobbying at the state and federal levels, I still have the conviction that public schools are underfunded.

In the mid-50s, they were underfunded, and they remain so, even though we are spending now about the same per pupil after adjusting for inflation. Aggravating that underfunding has been the gradual loss of a valuable subsidy that was enjoyed by public schools. Back in the day, if a woman wanted to work outside the home, she basically had three options – be a secretary, be a nurse, or be a teacher. That gave public schools a captive teaching workforce of highly capable women dedicated to teaching and, even then, paying the female teachers less than male teachers “because men had families to support.” When it was more feasible for women to pursue other, more lucrative, careers, the subsidy has gradually gone away and has not been replaced with added funding. We’ve all heard that you don’t know what you don’t know (per Vice President Cheney); the corollary is, what you don’t know, you can’t teach.

I got more education on the Board of Education.

Resegregation and Desegregation American Style

Across the nation, enrollment in our largest school districts has become predominantly made up of racial minority students since around 1954 when *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court. That decision held that racially segregated schools were inevitably unequal. They got that right. But they added a critically important caveat; it became prohibited to have racially identifiable schools “within a school district.” That was a loophole big enough to drive the desegregation/resegregation buses through, and school district boundaries became locked in concrete – Polk County, Iowa, is served by seventeen separate school districts, the superintendent of any one of which is probably capable of superintending all of Polk County, but not while prohibiting racially identifiable schools within a district remains the legal requirement. The same phenomenon



has been replicated in every large school district in the country with predominately racial-minority enrollment surrounded by lily-white, affluent suburbs. That resegregation was aided by federal money spent on freeway segments constructed from the inner city to the suburbs in the “name of public safety for suburbanites to get to/from work.”

Standardized Tests

Standardized tests are not intended to determine what students know; the results are not included in calculating their grades. The tests are intended to test the *school* that students attend. A standardized test tells how the school is performing when compared to other schools. That’s not all. A single outcome is utterly meaningless in “grading” the school. There need to be at least two readings. A school testing in the 80th percentile, for example, may have tested at the 85th percentile two years earlier and, therefore, that school lost ground during that two-year period when compared to other schools. A school that tests in the 70th percentile may have tested in the 60th percentile two years earlier – indicating a terrific school. The principal at the former should be taking lessons from the principal of the latter – instead, they are bragging about their school being in the 80th percentile, and citizens are buying it.



Class Size

A reduced class size has often been equated by many parents and school board members as the “gold standard” for determining a quality educational experience. In truth, that’s not even relevant as a measure of quality. Imagine a classroom where the math teacher asks students to turn to the next page in the textbook. If every student turns to page 98, the teacher can deal with a very large class room teaching math that day. If, on the other hand, some students turn to page 98, others turn to page 120, others turn to page 60, and still others can’t find their book – that teacher has a greater challenge for quality teaching math to the entire class. I’ve seen it; the total number of third and fourth graders didn’t achieve the perceived ideal for class size that parents wanted, so the school district created

[continued on page 4]

two third grade classes, two fourth grade classes, and one "combined" third and fourth grade class – all with the perceived ideal class size. But that combined class had a larger spectrum of student needs and reduced the quality of education being delivered, without the parents being the wiser.

Equality vs. Equity

I went on the Board of Education believing in equality; I exited twelve years later believing in equitable educational opportunities. I learned about Special Education programs designed for students with unique educational challenges. I also learned that there are students who first show up less prepared to learn than some of their kindergarten classmates. Federally-funded preschool programs have been proven effective in reducing or eliminating that disparity, *and it has never been fully funded. Never.* It's pretty elementary really, if you want comparable outcomes, more resources need to be invested when some of the inputs have greater challenges than others. Funds need to be focused where the needs are greater. Equity is more important than equality.

Deference to Parents

Lately, much has been made of deference to the educational wishes of parents. Some such deference is appropriate, but blind deference is not. Lots of my time and energy on the board of education was spent calming parents down. Parents do what parents do. I can recall times when the parents adamantly insisted that "Johnny didn't do it," only to be informed that "we have it on video." Without missing a beat, the parents replied, "Well, it wasn't Johnny's fault." Boards of Education are challenged to listen to the wishes of parents. The fact is that some parents subscribe to values that say it's okay to bully if you're bigger and tougher; it's okay in a pandemic not to wear a mask or socially distance; it's okay to lie, cheat, or steal if you don't

get caught. Case in point is the recent example of the parents of Ethan Crumbley, a school shooter who killed four people and wounded others. They bought a gun for an obviously troubled 15-year-old child. Then, when notified by the school that Ethan was searching on line for ammunition, his mother texted him saying that she was not upset with him *and he just needed to learn not to get caught.* Children learn something everyday and, some days, it's a competition between what the schools teach and what the parents teach. Blind deference to parental wishes is not the right balance.

That balance can be challenging – mother bears are notoriously, irrationally, protective of their cubs. That is part of the challenge for school board members, striking that balance and then holding firm, even in the face of death threats. I've been there and done that. Twenty-five years later I still suffer from PTSD that I garnered as a member of the board of education.

When evaluating candidates for election to the school board of education, look for people who understand the need for the right balance, people who have an agenda with which you agree, and people who know how to make a deal. Remember, candidates aren't running to be superintendent of schools; if elected, they will be one of several school board members. The critical skill-set is knowing how to make a deal that will advance the agenda; the school board president is *not* necessarily the most powerful or influential member of the school board. The most important school board member is the one most adept at making a deal. On a school board of seven, you don't have to be very smart to be effective; you just have to be able to count to four.

Smart people learn from their own experiences. Wise people learn from the experience of others. The foregoing are some of the things I learned serving on a board of education. You're welcome.



"He who fears he will suffer, already suffers because he fears."

Michel De Montaigne

In The Kitchen

with Brian Carlson



This Month's Recipe:

SHAVED FENNEL & CITRUS SALAD

WITH GINGER HONEY VINAIGRETTE

With warmer weather comes lighter fare, and I've been making this simple, fresh salad for years as a sort of kickoff to spring. I used my own homegrown lettuces here, but you can use any kind of lettuce mix you enjoy. Save the fennel fronds for a final garnish and extra flavor if you wish or add shaved Parmesan.

Ingredients

For salad:

- 1 large bulb fennel, shaved or thinly sliced, about 2-3 cups
- 2 pink grapefruits, cut into sections, about two cups (save juice for dressing)
- 6-8 cups baby salad greens, washed and dried or ready to eat
- 4 tablespoons toasted pine nuts (easy instructions below)

For dressing (makes about two cups):

- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Juice from sectioned grapefruit
- Juice from 1/2 lemon
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest
- 2 teaspoons prepared Dijon mustard
- 1/3 cup organic honey
- 1.5 ounces fresh ginger, one large piece, cut into chunks
- 1 clove fresh garlic, peeled
- 1 small shallot or 1/4 small red onion, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1/4 teaspoon sea or pink salt
- 1/4 teaspoon fresh ground pepper



Directions:

1. To make the dressing, place all ingredients except for olive oil into a small food processor or blender and puree finely. Add olive oil in small increments and pulse (food processor) or stream olive oil (blender) into dressing mixture until thick and emulsified. Set aside or make ahead and chill.
2. Toss salad greens in large mixing bowl with about 1/2 cup dressing. Use tongs to place lettuce onto salad plates. In separate small mixing bowl, toss grapefruit and fennel with 2-3 tablespoons of dressing. Layer mixture over greens and garnish with pine nuts.

* Serve with a hearty loaf of multigrain bread.

* Serves four as an appetizer or two for dinner.

* **Easy toasted pine nuts:** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Spread one cup of pine nuts onto a baking sheet. Roast pine nuts in oven for eight minutes, shaking them halfway through.





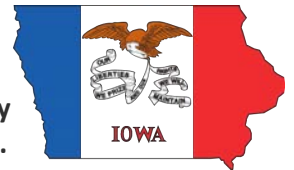
April Speaker



David Miglin

David Miglin is the VP of Media and Digital Services and Principal at Strategic America. Dave has over 30 years of marketing, communications, and management experience working with over 200 national and local brands. His volunteer activities include: Friends of Iowa CASA Board Member (2019 - present); Iowa Stage Theatre Company Executive Board Member (2016 - present); Polk County Democrats Communication Chair (2017 - present); New Leaders Council Advisor (2019 - 2020); and United Way of Central Iowa volunteer/donor. David Miglin is also a member of the Broadlawns Medical Center Board of Trustees.

Over the course of five years, Miglin visited every incorporated town and city in Iowa. In July 2021, he checked off his last town in West Bend.



You're Worthy And You Matter

by Madalina Coman

You weren't born
to lose yourself
within this darkness.

You were born
to rise,
to shine,
and thrive.

You were born
to live,
to give,
to love,
and
to be loved.



Beyond Bells: Playing the Tower Carillon

by Gary Moore



March Speaker Mark Babcock

On occasion, I wonder when hearing about an upcoming speaker at First Friday Breakfast Club whether I will enjoy the speaker or not. This month the idea of a church organist speaking had me questioning, but... I should have known better. As usual, our speaker was engaging and helped the 35 members that enjoyed the gallery surroundings of Hoyt Sherman Place (along with a few who joined us via Zoom) experience the joy of a Tower Carillon.

Mark Babcock, Professor of Choral Music at Central College, shared his experience of being the carillonneur for St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in downtown Des Moines. Learning to play the carillon started out as a learning sabbatical from Central College. St. Paul's had a practice carillon that allowed him to learn this largest of the musical instruments along with the pipe organ.

I suppose this is about as good of a place to provide this interesting tidbit. Mark met his husband at a meeting of the First Friday Breakfast Club. They were married in 2009. They attend St. Paul's Cathedral because it has been a leader in LGBTQ+ affirming institutions in Des Moines.

The present church building was completed in 1885, and the first service was held at Easter. St. Paul's opened at 815 High Street when locals called the area "Piety Hill," with six churches and a synagogue stretching a couple of blocks. St. Paul's is the only church from the hill still in its original location, though the late nineteenth century era St. Ambrose Cathedral stands two blocks to the east. Originally the church was built with 12 bells. Another 13 were added to bring it up to carillon requirements of at least 23 bells.

To play the 25 bell carillon is quite a workout. First, Mark must climb the red ladder's 26 rungs to the unheated, un-air-conditioned loft just below bells. He needs to ball his hands, lift them above his head and pound the batons and pedals to move the clappers connected by cords. The largest bronze bell weighs two tons and is the size of a small car. Imagine the size of that clapper. The sounds he creates fill the downtown with melodies. Compared to the electrical automated program, Mark can play softer or louder or faster or slower.

Mark is also the church's organist and choirmaster. He began playing the carillon live on Easter morning in 2020 when the leaders at St. Paul's wanted to give parishioners a special experience during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were unable to gather. He still recalls that day as one he will never forget. He recalled it was a cold rainy Easter in Des Moines. When he finished that Easter Day Concert, there was the sound of cars honking and people expressing their gratitude all along the streets of downtown.

Mark continues that weekly tradition, fitting Sunday morning performances in between services. He encourages FFBC members to come down on Sundays at nine and just sit in their car to enjoy this, one of the 171 carillons in the country.



FFBC Board Member, Ken Hanson, Introduces Mark Babcock, the March Speaker



Mark Babcock at the Carillon

March Meeting Photo Gallery

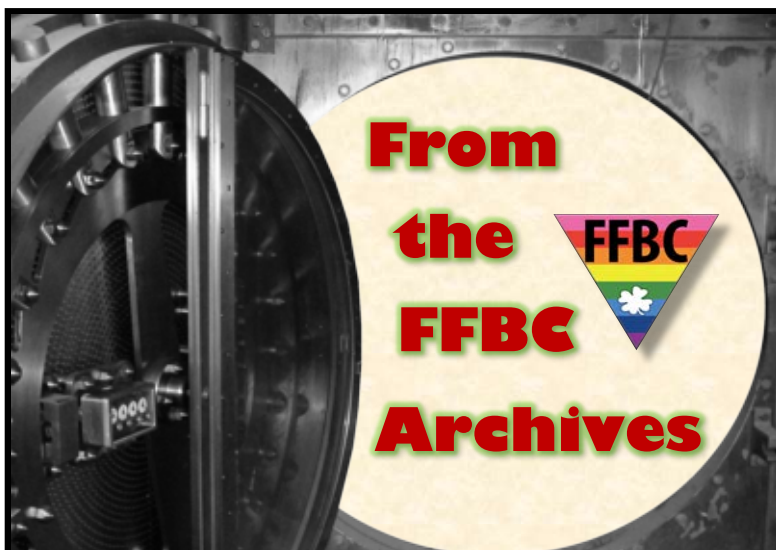


Photos by
Gary
Moore
&
Wade
Petersen



March Meeting Photo Gallery





5 Years Ago: April 2017

* In "Guns, Butter, and Arithmetic Reality," Jonathan Wilson discusses the "formula of polarity" to describe what doesn't add up in Trump's budgeting between domestic and military spending. Assuming no added productivity and no additional outside resources, what we choose to spend on the military must reduce correspondingly with what we spend on domestic principles.

* Robert Warren, Executive Director of Hoyt Sherman Place, is profiled as the March speaker by Bruce Carr. Warren discussed how Hoyt Sherman is taking a more active and aggressive role in marketing itself as a venue.

* Steve Person reviews *Young Elizabeth: The Making of the Queen* by Kate Williams.

* Matt McCoy writes about how the reorganization of Water Works bill will be bad for taxpayers and Des Moines.

10 Years Ago: April 2012

* Gary Kaufman reviews the movie *The Artist* as one of the most unusual artistic movies to come around in a long time.

* "The Surprisingly Gay Bible," written by Reverend Jonathan Page, highlights how, in a time of GOP pandering to its base, the Bible is probably disappointing to many Christians in that it contains virtually no mention of gay issues. A careful reading of certain texts reveals far more support for gays than you might expect.

* Bruce Carr summarizes the March speaker, Ellen Krug, who spoke of her journey from male to female and some of the things she has learned along the way.

* Jonathan Wilson, in his article "Time Again for Paul Revere," calls for some collaboration in the political arena of like-minded, progressive folks to form one committee. Local organizations appoint one representative. Ideas are brought back to the organizations for consideration.

15 Years Ago: April 2007

* Steve Person, having become a legislative assistant to Senator Amanda Ragan in the Iowa Legislature, is amazed anything gets accomplished with the antiquated and arcane process. "To retain respect for sausages and laws, one must not watch them in the making" (Otto Von Bismarck).

* In "The Bob Lemon Challenge," Jonathan Wilson describes Bob, a successful Washington attorney with a gay son. His support extended to Bob supporting FFBC by purchasing a dozen subscriptions to its newsletter for his friends and paying for FFBC memberships for new people. The continuing challenge is to reach out to locals who would benefit from the safety.



Future Speakers



May 6

Eric Shepard

Artistic Director & Conductor
Des Moines Gay Men's Chorus

June 3

Becky Smith

Executive Director
Iowa Safe Schools

July 16

FFBC PARTY

Home of FFBC Member,
John Schmacker



August 5

Jerry Hatfield

Climate Change

September 2

Cindy Axne

U.S. House Representative

October 7

Dana Cardin

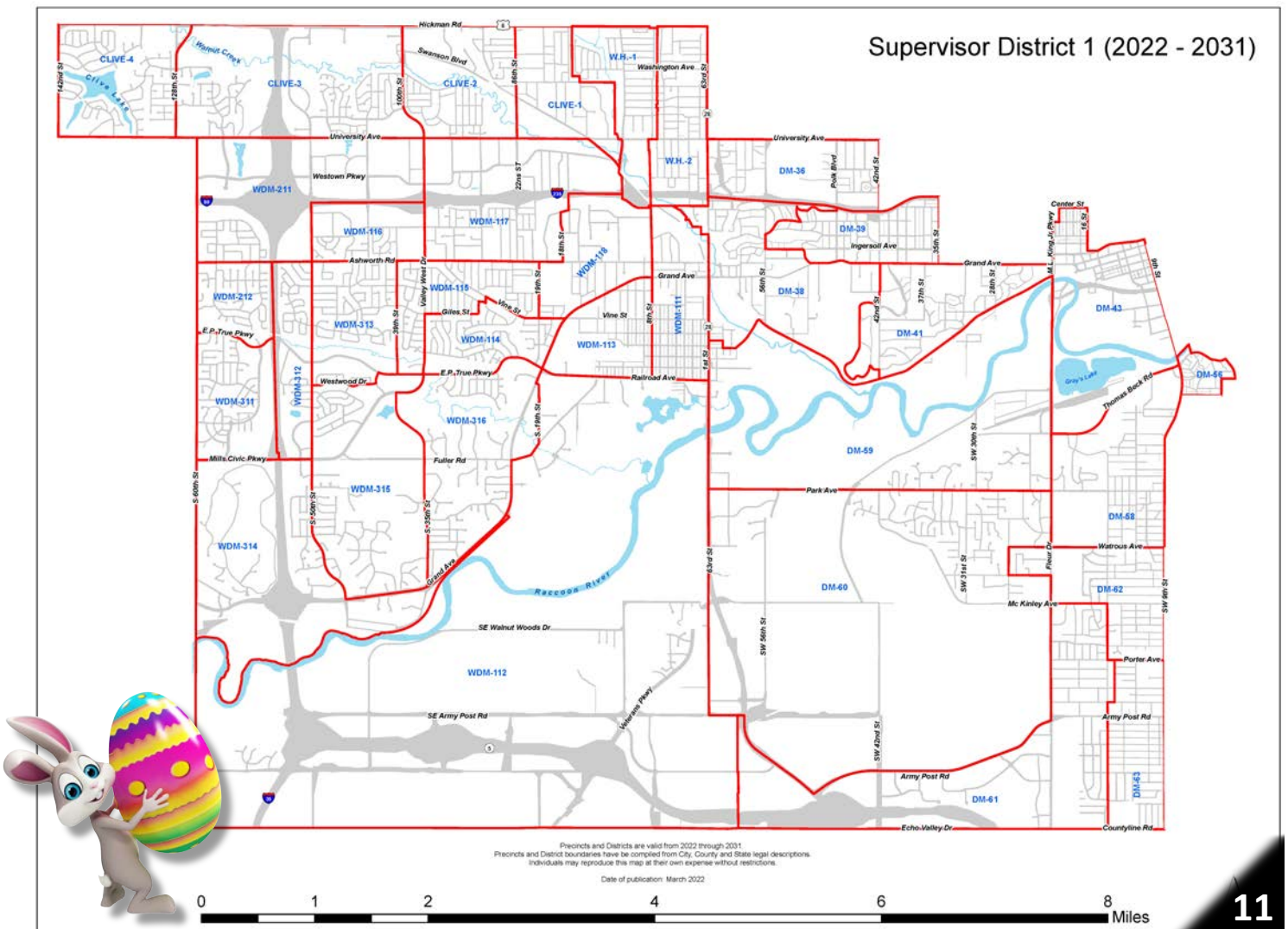
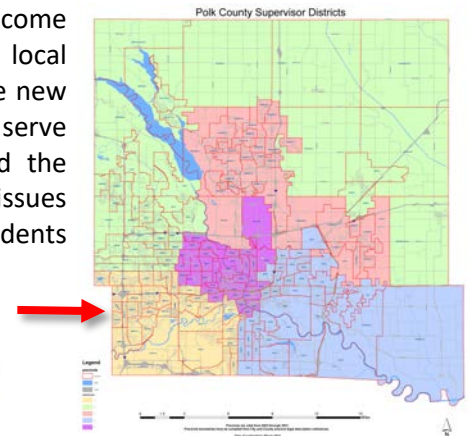
Retired KCCI
Reporter and Asst. News Director

by Supervisor Matt McCoy, Polk County, 5th District



I have been actively door knocking in Windsor Heights and Clive, which are two cities that I have never represented, either in the legislature or in the county supervisor position. I have received an overwhelming warm reception, and I look forward to serving these constituents on the Board of Supervisors. As of this writing, I do not have a primary opponent. However, the filing deadline is Friday, March 25 at 5 p.m. If someone were to file against me in

I plan to become very involved in local organizations in the new communities that I serve to fully understand the needs and issues important to residents within the district.



The Batman

A Movie Review by Mark Turnage

Good superhero films—Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* being one example—deconstruct their main character well enough to make both the character and the audience question their mission and the effects of their work. Similarly, a recurring theme in the genre of film noir is a main character deeply involved with crime and/or law enforcement, who already questions their place within an unforgiving and corrupt system. By striking harmony between both genres and adding elements of horror, Matt Reeves’ *The Batman* captures a beautiful, bleak, and dangerous Gotham City with its atmosphere, film noir narrative, and composer Michael Giacchino’s fantastic score. While the movie’s character development could be better, its dense plot and rich scenery give its detective enough immersive mystery-solving and action setpieces to make its three-hour runtime as noticeable as the Caped Crusader’s sneaking skills.

Reeves skips the origin story in favor of placing us immediately within the plot’s central mystery. On Halloween night—and in a scene reminiscent of “Halloween”—we see a point-of-view shot of the Gotham City mayor’s apartment through binoculars, their owner unseen and unheard except for heavy breathing. Later that night, the mayor is violently murdered by someone lurking in the shadows of his home, and a greeting card with a riddle is left behind. Batman (Robert Pattinson), in year two of his vigilantism, has a working relationship with the Gotham City police department thanks to Jim Gordon (Jeffrey Wright), but what he doesn’t have is their trust. When more city officials are killed by Riddler’s *Saw*-like traps and hint at a larger conspiracy, Batman and Gordon are led to mob lieutenant Oz “Penguin” Cobblepot (an unrecognizable Colin Farrell), and a waitress in his employ named Selina Kyle (Zoe Kravitz), who moonlights as a cat burglar. When Selina’s roommate goes missing, she agrees to help Batman solve Riddler’s twisted game and uncover the connection between his victims.

Pattinson’s Bruce Wayne isn’t a playboy, and his Batman isn’t the world’s “greatest” at anything. But he understands the character’s determination, ingenuity, and grit. Pattinson’s Batman is lo-fi, DIY, and makes mistakes—like when he biffs a landing hard enough to make you grimace despite having advanced tech, or when the Batmobile doesn’t start the first time it roars to life. Bruce Wayne is the closest character Pattinson has played to Edward Cullen in a long time, but if you check out his independent film resume, you’ll find he has more than enough acting chops for both an embittered, sleepless Bruce Wayne and a soft-spoken Batman that can be equal parts brooding and explosive. He’s compelling as both Bruce and Bats, even if he’s angsty, wears runny guyliner and makes funny rage faces during combat.

In his role, Paul Dano takes a traditionally campy character and transforms Riddler into a terrifyingly unhinged sociopath. More Zodiac Killer than arrogant puzzler, this Riddler has a far more desperate origin marked by extreme poverty, a deliberate contrast to Bruce’s wealthy upbringing. Yet the two share a striking amount of similarities—both are motivated by vengeance, operate as vigilantes, use both stealth and technology to accomplish their goals, and are brutal and fear-inspiring in their methods. Reeves uses the conflict between Batman and Riddler to set up the film’s commentary on class stratification: if upper-class corruption is left unchecked, lower- and middle-class extremism becomes more visible, more viral, and more vicious in response. Riddler’s actions drive Batman’s evolution from a vigilante hungry for vengeance into a Dark Knight seeking justice. Not since Nolan’s *Batman Begins* has class warfare been so encapsulated in a Batman villain and their methodology.

Both Batman and Riddler are fresh interpretations, but it’s Kravitz’s Catwoman who’s brightest in this dark city. Badass, charismatic, and most of all plausible, the most moving scenes in the film are hers, and whenever she’s onscreen, she steals the show. Her character’s evolution is not so much heroic as it is personal, but that’s peak Catwoman, if you ask me. Not all the cast is given the same preference. Alfred (Andy Serkis) is somewhat bland and underutilized to the point that a pivotal scene involving him lacks pathos, and the relationship between Batman and Gordon needs more substance. But it’s the mystery that always takes center stage—when Selina isn’t, that is.

The Batman is more seedy film noir than shiny superhero story, but what makes it stand apart from its peers are the questions, intrigue, and excitement it builds in its well-crafted world. See it and enjoy your stay in Gotham.



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The Lincoln Highway

by Amor Towless

AMOR TOWLES

New York Times bestselling author of
A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW

The
**LINCOLN
HIGHWAY**
A Novel



A Book Review by Steve Person

I am not given to reading too many novels unless they are especially well written. Oddly enough, it was a dear friend in England whose enthusiasm for this novel compelled me to order it and give it a go. My friend--I'll call her Pam--became enthralled with this story even though she had never set foot in the parts of the United States featured in this book.

The Lincoln Highway, a.k.a. U.S. 6, began on Forty-second Street in New York City and stretched across eleven states, including Iowa, and concluded in Lincoln Park in San Francisco. It was the nation's first transcontinental highway.

The story begins in Morgen, Nebraska. It's June 1954. The warden of a boys' detention center located in neighboring Kansas delivers Emmett Watson to his home. Emmett, still not a legal adult, is sent to the center as a result of being convicted of manslaughter for the accidental death of the town's bully. Emmett is released early due to his father's untimely death.

Emmett has an eight-year-old brother named Billy. Billy is a young boy besotted with the teachings of one Professor Abernathie and his book, *Compendium of Heroes, Adventurers, and Other Intrepid Travelers*. The book is a digest of ancient stories and true-life adventures stretching over a period of thousands of years. It truly is Billy's bible.

The boys, now parentless, decide to seek their fortune in other parts of the country. Emmett wants to migrate to Texas and buy run-down properties and then rehab them for resale. Billy insists they drive to San Francisco and search for their mother who abandoned them shortly after Billy's birth. The only evidence Billy can provide that she is still alive are the eight postcards she sent from various towns on her journey west.

Enter Duchess and Woolly. The two of them stowed away in the trunk of the warden's car when Emmett was brought home. They silently climbed out of the trunk while the warden delivered Emmett to his home. Despite the name, Duchess is a boy whose father is a broken-down actor. Woolly comes from a New York wealthy family. Duchess and Woolly convince Emmett to drive to New York and claim Woolly's grandfather's \$150,000 bequest to him.

The odyssey goes east and not west. Once the three boys split the money, contained in the safe of grandfather's country estate in upstate New York, they plan for each to go their separate ways. Needless to say, life interferes.

Amor Towles relates the narrative from the points of view of the main characters and other lesser characters who enter the plot line along the way. The emphasis the author lays on important stories from Ancient Greece to the real-life wanderings of Marco Polo help to shape the telling of the incidents in this book. It is a fascinating read with effective layers of story telling. The book's conclusion leaves many questions unanswered and, I hope, will set the stage for a sequel.