

AFTER SCHOOL MOUNTAINEERING

Picture the soothing see-saw baritone of “Prairie Home Companion’s” Garrison Keillor closing another show with.... “And that’s the news from Fairfield, where the children are joyful, strong, healthy, creative and productive and the families are all above average”. I imagined that cozy fantasy while attending the July 11th city council study session on after school programs where city council members, staff and engaged citizens proposed to weave a protective cloak for Fairfield’s greatest asset, its youth.

Reminiscences of a gentle past can forge dreams and goals for a promising future. That future is our youth and the goal is wellness; physical and social, intellectual, environmental and spiritual. A community’s commitment to the development of its youth is an indisputable barometer of its sanity, safety, civility and sustenance.

Crime is a multi-headed Hydra. Slaying the monster takes weapons and wisdom. Intense enforcement, arrests, litigation and incarceration are crucial but are not effective alone. Relentlessly getting the bad guys and sending a zero tolerance message to criminals is vital. Making the sustainable sea change to a safe and healthy community also takes building a better boat, a better Fairfield.

The notion that children are raised by villages is quaint, romantic and has some merit. However, we all can agree that ill-educated, unproductive, non creative, and poorly trained, non engaged youths will most certainly raze the village.

Here are just a few gee whiz highlights from the Departments of Labor and Education, multiple foundations and alliances, the U.S. Census and over 45 major carefully done studies. Mid to late afternoon hours are prime moments with bad outcomes stemming from teens messing with drugs, smoking, alcohol, sex and crime at rates three times those for teens who are in after school programs. Lack of adult supervision is clearly associated with lower social skills, lower GPA and higher rates of teen pregnancy. Eighty percent of parent’s work outside the home and over half of schoolchildren are latchkey. Over 3 hours of TV on weekdays is linked to increased aggressive behavior.

Some argue that massive coordinated community commitment to after school programs is not justifiable. Consider these data. A youth wasted in crime costs about \$1.5 million. Evidence suggests a 3:1 return just from saving the costs of remedial education, grade repetition and enforcement, litigation and incarceration. Surveys consistently show that 90% of parents support after school programs and two thirds of parents missed less work because of them. Academic measures of children involved in after school programs show major improvements and the sites of these activities are usually the safest in town.

Some economic realities will not change. Three quarters of mothers are employed and work weeks have increased 7.9% since 1960. The gap between school day and work ending is 25 hours per week.

Those hours of care consume 9-23% of household income. Experts estimate real costs of \$1500-\$2500 per child annually once programs plateau and all prior costs to the community are carefully accounted.

D-Day worked due to focused funding, intense coordination and communication and a clear command and control structure after engaging everyone's input. The city is planning a summit on after school programs. Climbing that mountain requires we all grab a piton and belay together; politicians, opinion leaders, citizens, faith based groups, subject matter experts, law enforcement, educators, non profits and youths-everyone.

There is grant money out there and as a seasoned warrior of many a grant proposal, I can tell you that coordinated, comprehensive program applications with total community buy-in win the awards. Call council members, talk to John M De Lorenzo, Director of Community Services at 428 7465. Read what works on the internet and show up at the summit to forge a crucial part of our future-our children.

If we make the climb together, perhaps "Prairie Home Companion" will open one day with Mr. Keillor saying..., "Well, it was a quiet week in Fairfield..."

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.