

Some things are just obviously wrong

THE ISSUE | Children being seriously injured or killed by adults.
OUR OPINION | The frequency of local cases is increasing at a time when the national rate is declining.

A heartbreaking trend has emerged locally, one that is unthinkable and unnatural.

Since 2001, there have been at least eight reported cases of adults severely injuring or killing children in Steuben and Chemung counties. Those have resulted in six deaths and two injuries. The perpetrators and suspects have been mothers, boyfriends and a father.

If the numbers weren't disturbing enough, consider that the frequency of the cases is intensifying at a time when rates of infanticide are declining nationally.

Locally, seven cases of babies being killed or seriously injured have occurred since 2004. The most recent death was reported Sunday in Elmira, just 10 days after another infant's death had been ruled a homicide in that city.

The mothers of both the victims – a seven-week-old girl and a two-month-old boy – have been charged with second-degree murder. Since the cases are so recent, there are few details about exactly what happened in both instances and why.

More details could surface in another case – that of Kristy L. VanEtten, of

Corning. She was charged this year with assault in connection with injuries suffered by her 8-month-old son. The infant has since died and the Steuben County District Attorney's office is considering lodging more serious charges.

The incidents raise a host of questions.

Why did these violent acts happen? How could they have been prevented? Were there signs of trouble ahead? Are there recognizable signals that something bad is about to happen? Why do adults hurt kids?

The circumstances in each case may have been different, but the result was similar. Innocent little kids were either badly hurt or killed.

It's unacceptable behavior that the judicial system is handling. As a community, we must realize that these types of terrible things can happen. We must also be aware that government and nonprofit agencies – like the Department of Social Services – exist to educate and deal with these crises.

If you suspect abuse or want to learn more about parenting, contact the Steuben office at 776-7611 or the Chemung office at 737-5309.

NATIONAL VIEW | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Ha, ha, ha. Merry Christmas

Some holiday controversies are so stupid we hate to dignify them with criticism. This isn't one of them. This one, in fact, is irresistible. Ready? A company that hires Santas to work in shopping malls has advised its employees not to use the word "ho."

"Ho, ho, ho" can be demeaning to women, an over-earnest Santa trainer explained to a group of recruits in Sydney, Australia. An appropriate substitute is "ha, ha, ha."

Hee, hee, hee. Don't you love it?

At least two Santas stomped out of the session in disgust and quickly alerted the media. The public relations crew for Westaff, which provides shopping-mall Santas all over the world, insists the company did not ban the three hos outright; it merely pointed out the fine line between naughty and nice and left things to the discretion of individual Santas.

The suggestion that Santa might be teaching our kids dirty words struck us upside the head like a snowball. All this time we've been blaming that Snoop Dogg character. Could it be ...? But no. A kid who is old enough to snicker over the word "ho" would not be caught dead sitting on Santa's lap. Those crayoned letters to the North Pole have been replaced by catalog Web links, e-mailed directly to the parents – which means the kid has learned to navigate the Internet, and naughty words are the least of our worries.

The PC police have never met a holiday that didn't offend. Halloween fosters Satanism, disparages Wiccans and promotes tooth decay. Valentine's Day marginalizes singles. Thanksgiving glorifies overindulgence and glosses over the ugly chapters of the Pilgrim-Indian story.

But Christmas has always gotten the worst of it. The campaign to put Christ back in Christmas was followed by the campaign to take Him back out and celebrate "the holidays" instead. The annual Christmas pageant is now "Winterfest," and the nativity is not allowed on public property. The threshold for too much political correctness was finally breached this month in Fort Collins, Colo., where a civic task force recommended that red and green lights be banned from the city's holiday display on the grounds that they're too religious. On Tuesday, the City Council thumped the recommendation, 6-1. Ho, ho, ho!

Who are these people who believe the world would be a better place if Christmas lights were white and Santa Claus said "ha, ha, ha" to small children? If you're one of them, ask Santa to bring you a life. If you're not, then we invite you to join our campaign to take back the ho. Are we going to let some rent-a-Santa company turn a spontaneous expression of holiday merriment into a Don Imus epithet?

No, no, no.

LETTERS POLICY | THE LEADER

■ Letters should be typed or neatly printed.

■ Letters must be kept to a maximum of 250 words. Letters longer than that will not be considered.

■ Letters must be signed and include an address and phone number. No letters will be published unless verified with the author in person or by telephone.

■ Letters may be edited for space considerations.

■ The publication of any letter is at the discretion of the editor.

■ All letters become the

property of *The Leader* and cannot be returned to sender.

Mail your letters to:

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
THE LEADER
PO BOX 1017
CORNING, NY 14830

Letters also may be dropped off at our office:

Corning office
34 W. Pulteney St.

Fax your letter to:

Corning | (607) 936-9939

ARTIST'S VIEW



COMMENTARY | MICHAEL SMERCONISH

Cell phones cut secondary circle of kinship

I had an epiphany at the Thanksgiving table, somewhere between passing the stuffing and inhaling a drumstick.

Technology is killing our means of communication.

I know that sounds counterintuitive, and you're probably thinking I was hallucinating from too much trypophan. But it's true. The stuff that is supposed to keep us in touch is making us more distant. In particular, I blame advances in cell phone technology.

What spurred my thought was the absence of two usual guests from our turkey table, "Aunt Laura" and "Uncle Don," my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, respectively. He's a retired NYPD lieutenant, a big guy who used to work security for Rudy Giuliani. Loves the Yanks, but is nevertheless fun to be around. He's godfather to one of our sons and tells good stories. One holiday, he regaled us with his late-night rescue of Frank

Sinatra in a New York alley.

She's a character, too. Her name is Laura, but our kids call her "Aunt Kitty" for reasons that have always been a mystery to me. It might have something to do with her antique doll collection, but I'm not sure.

They're fun to be around, which is why I was sorry they couldn't join us this year, and these days, I hardly talk to either of them. All of my gadgets, which supposedly enhance our ability to communicate, have seen to that.

I'm BlackBerry-addicted. I have a PC and a laptop. I enjoy my iPod. Love my GPS.

But I don't use any of those to reach out to Laura and Don. We're congenial, but not that close. We don't call one another, although I know we should. Apart from semi-annual visits, ours was the sort of relationship kept intact when I served as an intermediary for communication with my wife.

This goes back to the

days when the only phone ringing was a house telephone – usually in the kitchen – and whoever was closest picked it up. After a few words, it would often get handed off to the call's intended recipient: "Phone!" You know how that works.

When the phone rings today, it's a BlackBerry or cell phone, and the only person who answers is the intended recipient. There is no secondary circle of communication. Gone is the communication with the person who is a relative on your spouse's side of the family. Today, when my sister-in-law wants to talk to my wife, she calls her directly, or sends her an e-mail.

I'm out of the loop.

In some situations, this is a plus. It can spare what I call "stupid talk," spare contact with acquaintances I find annoying. But mostly I think it's a bad thing.

■ Michael Smerconish writes a weekly column for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The mother of all distortions

TO THE EDITOR | Earlier this week my opponent Randy Kuhl published an attack editorial accusing the Democrats of being the "Party of Higher Taxes." While that might make for a good Washington sound byte, the facts tell a very different story.

Randy Kuhl launched his reckless and irresponsible attack on the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Congressman Charlie Rangel, because of his objection to the Temporary Tax Relief Act (H.R. 3996), which recently passed the House of Representatives. If this bill becomes law, 23 million American families will see their taxes cut. Feeding on the misconception that Democrats want to raise taxes, my opponent's high-priced political advisors in Washington told him to call it "the mother of all tax hikes." In reality, it's the mother of all tax relief packages.

This is a bill that will provide over \$50 billion in tax relief. Chairman Rangel's bill achieves this historic tax cut by ensuring that middle class families are no longer subject to the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT). According to Citizens for Tax Justice, an estimated 50,884 taxpayers in our district alone will be hit by the AMT in 2007 unless the Democrats can pass this bill. However by opposing and attacking this legislation and its supporters, Randy Kuhl is working against tax cuts for every

one of these hardworking families right in his own backyard.

The new Democratic Congress is correcting the failed Bush tax "cuts," which have done nothing more than provide gigantic payouts for people making more than \$200,000 a year and told middle class families to pay for it. For seven years, we have seen our prosperity fade away as George Bush's reckless economic policies have acted like Robin Hood in reverse – stealing from the poor and the middle-class to give to the rich. I believe this is the wrong approach for New York and the wrong approach for America.

I served for 24 years in the U.S. Navy, and that's where I learned to watch the back of my fellow sailors. I haven't forgotten those values. Our middle class families in Western New York are being squeezed tighter and tighter every year. This tax bill will help those families. It will require some Wall Street multi-millionaires to pay more of their fair share and put a stop to the Bush/Kuhl approach of saddling our grandchildren with trillions in debt – and I am all right with that.

So why is Mr. Kuhl desperately trying to portray this tax break as a tax hike? Why is Randy Kuhl digging up every Republican Party talking point he can find to distort this issue? Why is he crying foul and throwing everything including the kitchen sink at Democrats who are trying to give a break to middle class families instead of the ultra

wealthy?

The answer is simple. Since the facts are not on his side, his only option is to try and muddy the waters, distort the facts, and hope you don't notice. But as I've always believed, the more desperately your opponents attack – the more you know that you must be doing something right.

Eric Massa
Corning

Thank you for your faith in me

TO THE EDITOR | I wish to express my sincere thanks to Catlin town residents for your vote in the primary and general election. It is heartwarming and truly humbles me to think that so many would leave their homes to cast a vote for me.

My goal will remain the same as the past eight years – honesty, integrity, fairness, and ensuring that justice is served in this town.

A special thanks to those who wished to have my signs in front of their homes; I am grateful for your kindness. And a very special thank you to Mr. John Pastrick for his letter in my support. This was over and above anything I expected.

I truly believe that I am blessed to have so many that care so much for me. My prayer is that your faith in me will be well founded. Thank you all.

Larry Edwards
Catlin

COMMENTARY | TATIANA YANKELEVICH

Pressure on Putin required for release of entrepreneurs

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice should seize on two recent favorable European court decisions to pressure Vladimir Putin for the release of two Russian entrepreneurs now languishing in Siberian prisons on what most human rights observers view as politically motivated charges.

In 2003, the Kremlin seized Russian oil giant Yukos and later sentenced its top two executives, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev – both outspoken political opponents of Putin – to eight-year prison terms for tax-evasion and money-laundering.

Yukos itself was slapped with \$26 billion in back-tax claims, declared bankrupt and largely taken over by the state-owned oil company run by Putin cronies.

Unable to find justice in Putin-dominated Russian courts, lawyers for the two men pressed their cases in European courts and among the world's free media.

Last month, they scored some notable legal victories that should open the door for Rice and such American allies as France's Nicolas Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel to increase the pressure on Putin to release the two men.

On Oct. 31, a Dutch court in Amsterdam ruled that Russia's forced bankruptcy of Khodorkovsky's Yukos "was not in line with Dutch principles law" and that it could not recognize the bankruptcy as legitimate. It barred a receiver from selling \$2 billion in assets of the Dutch-based Yukos Finance BV.

The Dutch court added that Yukos was denied a fair trial to establish how much in back taxes it had to pay the Russian government, providing ammunition for Khodorkovsky's charge that the Kremlin pursued the bankruptcy as revenge for his political ambitions and criticism of the Putin regime.

The Dutch action followed on the heels of an Oct. 25 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, that Russia violated the rights of Lebedev, who was sentenced to nine years in jail in 2005 on charges of fraud and tax evasion.

European rights activists called the Yukos case "the first show trial of post-Stalinist era" – contending the persecution of Lebedev and Khodorkovsky has derailed Russia's progress along the road to democracy.

The human rights court found that Lebedev's rights to liberty and security were violated during his arrest and subsequent pretrial detention and ordered Russia to pay \$4,269 in damages and \$9,961 for legal costs.

A few days before, Russia prevented Khodorkovsky from filing for a parole for a variety of disputed prison infractions that included not having his hands behind his back as he returned from an exercise walk. The charge followed on the heels of a penalty against Khodorkovsky for keeping "unauthorized lemons in his cell."

The two recent decisions by respected European courts provide an opening for the United States and its European allies to exert strong pressure on Putin to release Lebedev and Khodorkovsky from their imprisonment in the bleak Siberian city of Chita – 3,700 miles from the relatives and friends in Moscow.

Drawing a line in the sand against such human rights abuses is especially important for the nations of European Union, many of whom have obsequiously kow-towed before Putin's threats to withhold from them vitally needed supplies of natural gas.

■ Tatiana Yankelevich is the director of the Sakharov Program on Human Rights at The Andrei Sakharov Archives and Center at Harvard University.