

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Returns are in: The popular kids still rule in Pleasantville

SOURCE: BILL McCLELLAN

DATE: April 9, 2006

PUBLICATION: St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO)

EDITION: Fourth Edition

SECTION: Metro

PAGE: D1

It is hard to talk treason when the chardonnay is chilled just so and the pinot noir has overtones of sweet oak and wild blackberry. And that, as much as anything, explains why the spirit of revolt, which was so evident on election day in Sunset Hills and St. Louis, was barely discernible in Pleasantville. Sure, eminent domain was an issue, but who wants a revolution when the status quo is ever so comfortable? The beginnings of the failed revolution can be traced to the Board of Aldermen's decision to give Centene Corp. the power to use eminent domain to secure five pieces of property just west of the old Library Limited building on Forsyth. As it always does on important matters, the board acted unanimously. Dissent is not a virtue in Pleasantville. It is considered too much like confrontation.

There is, also, a practical benefit to unanimity. The charter in Pleasantville stipulates that if the board gives a matter a first and second reading on the same night, and if both readings result in unanimous votes, the matter cannot later be reversed. So it was with the matter of eminent domain on Forsyth. When citizens began circulating a petition asking that the matter be put to a referendum, the unanimity clause in the charter was invoked. The matter was closed.

And so the revolution began. In two of the city's three wards, dissident candidates came forward.

Officially, Pleasantville is a municipality -- an inner ring suburb, actually, and the seat of St. Louis County -- but in reality, it is a high school. Maybe all of life is high school. A combination of high school and the Hotel California. You graduate, but you can never leave. In Pleasantville, the Board of Aldermen has always been the province of the popular kids.

For this revolt, the other groups got together -- the nerds, the freaks and the goths. Our most prominent goth is a man who got a quick splash of national publicity 10 years ago when his best friend in high school, Ted Kaczynski, was arrested as the Unabomber. I like the man and was glad to see him with us. If you're going to have a chance to beat the popular kids in Pleasantville, you need everybody else working together.

From the beginning, though, it was clear we had an uphill fight. Just about everybody who would be considered cool was against us. Some of the popular kids were angry that we were challenging them. This challenge was centered in my neighborhood, which is considered Lower Pleasantville. One Saturday morning, I noticed squad cars driving up and down my street. I asked an officer what was going on. The alderman is going to be canvassing on your block and she has requested a police presence, the officer said.

Police protection? We might be freaks and so forth, but we're not savages. We don't chill our red wine or anything. It was all very unPleasantville.

The challenge in the ward to our west was even stranger. The alderman had decided she didn't want to campaign, so she dropped out. That seemed to mean the challenger would win. But if he were to win, the unanimity on the board would be lost. So the popular kids recruited a write-in candidate. Soon her yard signs were all over the ward.

One person I felt sorry for was David Danforth. He seems like a cool guy. By all rights, he should have been with the popular kids. But he happened to own one of the pieces of property that Centene was authorized to take. So he found himself aligned with the freaks, nerds and goths.

He was gracious about it. He let us use his building for our election night party. By then, of course, we already knew we were going to lose. Eminent domain might be a big issue elsewhere, but people in Pleasantville tend to trust authority. And why not? Still, the failed dissidents gathered to drink chardonnay and talk treason one last night. Bret Rich, the candidate from the ward to our west, told a lot of good stories. Back when he thought he was running unopposed, he had yard signs all over. Then the write-in candidate filed, and people started calling Rich. "Could you come and get your sign?"

Danforth's wife, Tina, also told a lot of good stories. "I'm just the Poor White Trash he married," she said, and it was clear she was making fun of a certain attitude in Pleasantville rather than of her upbringing in the blue collar suburb of Overland. In truth, she seemed very classy.

Toward the end of the night, when we realized that all that was left was for somebody to write the history of our failed revolt, there was some bickering. Cynthia Holmes, the candidate from my ward, came up to me. "I don't want to be a nerd," she said. "I want to be a freak."

Caption:

Correction: