

The Dallas Post

EDITORIALS

Plug the holes in child worker act

As Grace Dove's articles in last weeks *Dallas Post* pointed out, the system designed to prevent known criminals from working with or around children is full of loopholes. It also is prone to negligence or outright abuse, with the result that a man convicted of providing alcohol to minors was employed as a school bus driver for eight years, most of them in the Dallas School District.

The state statute known as Act 34 was adopted January 1, 1986, with the intention of weeding out persons convicted of certain misdemeanors or felonies. It applies to teachers, day care workers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and others who work with or near children. The Act requires a background check when an individual is first hired for this type of work, or has left and returned after one year or more. In theory, it would turn up every conviction on an adult's record, from anywhere in Pennsylvania, and possibly beyond. In practice, the investigation is superficial, and the records on which it relies are far from complete.

Lt. Robert Hanula, of the Records Identification Division of the Pennsylvania State Police Central Repository in Harrisburg, says that his files have a built-in lag of six to 12 months between the date of a conviction and its posting to the record. He also admits that a conviction may never show up if fingerprints don't match a computer database, the name is misspelled or other inconsistencies are present. "If you start out with a clean Act 34 and are later convicted of an offense—especially if it's out of state—chances are that no one will ever find out about it," Hanula said. Even convictions within Pennsylvania but outside the local area are unlikely to show up.

That is a completely unacceptable set of circumstances. If the state, and local school districts as well, are serious about keeping potential predators away from children, Act 34 must be amended or replaced with stronger protections, and employers must go beyond the minimum when investigating potential workers. Here's what the state must do.

- Keep convictions permanently on the record for Act 34 purposes. The law now states that only convictions in the prior five years may be considered when screening a potential employee. That's ridiculous; anyone who has ever been convicted of offenses like murder, rape or endangering the welfare of children should never be allowed to work with children again.

- Establish a more comprehensive and up-to-date record system. In this age when anyone with a \$500 personal computer can log onto the Internet, it would be a relatively simple matter to construct a fast, reliable database that would include all courts in Pennsylvania, and probably other states as well. This would prove useful in other matters as well as protecting children.

- With adequate systems in place, require that convictions be posted promptly. There's no reason why all convictions couldn't be entered within 30 days of the judgement, then removed if an appeal proves successful.

These changes can't take place overnight, and in the meantime local school districts can take measures that would likely detect applicants who now breeze through a system riddled with gaps.

- Require that any subcontractor share with the district the complete personnel file of all employees, starting with all reference material from the initial application.

- Add to the minimum state requirements references from all previous employers over the past five years and background checks with police departments in the applicant's hometown and where he or she has worked, no matter how far away.

- Be certain that all complaints or incidents involving an employee are relayed to the subcontracting company and posted to files in the district's office and those kept by the company.

If the state and school districts think it's important to screen applicants, it must be done to the best of their ability. That hasn't been the case, but everyone can agree it must improve now that the system has been revealed as little more than a thin veil of protection. Until corrective measures are written into law, local administrators must demand greater accountability from anyone who wants to do business with the schools.

Letters, columns and editorials

The *Dallas Post* attempts to publish opinions on a variety of topics in many forms.

Editorials, which are the opinion of the management of *The Post*, appear on the editorial page. Any artwork represents the opinion of the cartoonist, and columns are the opinion of the author.

Letters to the editor are welcome and will be published, subject to the following guidelines:

- Letters should not exceed 500 words.
- No writer may have more than one letter published during a 30-day period, except as a reply to another letter.
- Letters must be signed and include the writer's home town and a telephone number for verification.
- Names will be withheld only if there exists a clear threat to the writer.
- The *Post* retains the right to accept or reject any letter, and to edit letters for grammar and spelling, as well as to eliminate any libel, slander or objectionable wording.

In addition to letters, we welcome longer pieces that may run as columns. The author or subject's relevance to the Back Mountain will be the prime consideration when selecting material for publication.



Dallas artists paint windows

Art II students from Dallas Senior High School carried on the tradition of painting windows for the holidays for the resident of Valley Crest Nursing Home. Window painters were, seated: Amanda Nothen, Kelly Johnson, Brianne Nutaitis, Bill Lowe, Ken Marsola; standing, teacher Debra Bayer, Joy Holeman, Scott Labbate, James Wallace, John Molski, Pete Lubinski and Jamy Kozak.

As I was saying



Jack Hilsher

New York City's famous Stork Club would have been just another nightclub except that it became a sort of office for newspaper columnist Walter Winchell. The grandson of Rabbi Chaim Winchel, who single-handedly invented the gossip column, added a second "l" to his name because he thought it looked classier that way.

Winchell died in 1972, close to his 75th birthday, and at one time every American knew him through his column, which reached 50 million readers, and his radio and TV broadcasts. Today, several generations do not have the slightest idea who he was or what he did.

The Stork Club, Winchell's "office," was a high-priced celebrity hangout which opened in 1933 when liquor became legal. Winchell mentioned it so often in his column that the owner, ex-Okla-

Walter Winchell and the bad old days of the Stork Club

homan and ex-con Sherman Billingsley, saw to it that Winchell was given super service every time he came in, which was often. They became friends, of a sort, and Billingsley became a millionaire. For over twenty years mentions in Winchell's column provided the Stork Club with free advertising...his column eventually was syndicated in over 700 papers.

The club was not a place for entertainment, nor for dining. It was a place to "see" and "be seen." Every night a variety of celebrities, characters and society names (like Deb of the Year Brenda Frazier - yesterday's Brooke Shields came in and Billingsley fawned on them all. It has been called a "playground for snobs."

Female guests received bottles of expensive perfume, or even cocker spaniels, courtesy of Mr. B. Cases of brandy were sent to male patrons. When the club prospered Sherman added a section called the "Cub Room" where Winchell presided nightly from Table 50, collecting "items" for his daily columns.

Billingsley was fussy about who he allowed in his club. Blacks never. Sometimes Jews who were not known to his staff were turned away. If they protested, "What

about those empty tables?" the cold answer came, "They are reserved."

Billingsley never did hide his prejudices very well. His staff knew. So did Winchell. A friend said, "Walter, how can you be friendly with a guy like that? You fight prejudice and he hates niggers. You're a Jew and he is anti-Semitic." "I know," Winchell replied sadly, "But Sherman never lets me see that side."

Billingsley had three years on TV with a so-so show. He was a poor interviewer (he once stated flatly that he killed a man out west) but he had interesting guests. The show had a good audience but went off the air in 1953.

By then the Stork was on its last legs. The new "in" crowd preferred discos and the glamour was gone. Sherman's friendship with Winchell was over. The club closed in 1965 and Sherman died one year later. Nostalgia buffs touring the Big Apple don't gawk much anymore since wrecking crews did their thing.

The old Stork Club location is now a small park, which seems quite fitting. It is now a kids playground. Used to be for grown-ups.

J.W.J.



John W. Johnson

Believe it or not, a Lycoming county drug addict has been sentenced to prison for vehicular homicide for the second time in 11 years.

Ironically, his victims were sisters.

Robert Munn has been sentenced from 3 to 7 years for the Nov. 12, 1993 accident that killed his 29-year old wife Teresa, a mother of four young children. Alcohol, cocaine, methadone and morphine were in Munn's blood when his car crashed into a tree, killing his wife.

In 1986, Munn was sentenced to 10 months in jail for the Oct. 6, 1982 accident that killed his wife's 19-year old sister. At that time, Munn was shown to have alcohol in his blood when his car hit a utility pole.

And, believe it or not, both times Munn was driving without a license.

Ten months for the first homicide?

Three to seven years (probably out in less than two) for the second homicide?

Has our judicial system gone crazy? Or are we such a drug addicted society that we cannot bring ourselves to the reality that those who kill under the influence of drugs ought to be locked up in the deepest, darkest hole in the ground for the rest of their natural lives.

Likewise, those who drink and drive ought to learn what it is to walk for about five years.

There is—and should not be—any excuse, justification or ra-

The law is much too soft on drunk drivers

tionalization for anyone to get behind the wheel of an automobile with any—repeat (ANY) reaction altering substance in their body. Those who do should be punished severely.

My own experience includes learning how to drive while trying to get my alcoholic father home from the bar; which is to say, better an inexperienced 12-year old than an inebriated 40-year old behind the wheel.

My experience also includes the destruction of two separate vehicles—on separate occasions—by two different drunk drivers...all within the space of just 29 days.

While sitting at a Washington, D.C. intersection waiting for the light to change, I noticed a car in the rear view mirror traveling toward me at a high rate of speed.

Was he going to stop?

Did he have enough time to stop?

No was the answer to both questions. His car hit mine in the rear end with sufficient force to knock me through the intersection which contained four lanes of traffic. Fortunately, it was during a lull in the traffic stream that it occurred, or there would have been serious injuries to more than several persons.

I exited my car, only to find that the other driver was on the ground. Thinking he was injured, I ran to him and discovered that his being on the ground was caused by being too drunk to walk.

He crawled to the back of my car, ostensibly to obtain my license plate number. Forty five minutes later, the police arrived, and after some preliminary questions, let the man drive away.

That's right. Let him drive away. You see, in Washington, traffic accidents are not even investi-

gated unless there is a death.

So here I am, with a disabled vehicle in the middle of Washington, D.C. In the middle of the night. The police have disappeared, as has the drunk driver. It cost me nearly \$1,000 just to make repairs sufficiently to drive the car back to Pennsylvania; and then an additional \$1,500 more. Of course, the other driver didn't have insurance, so it came out of my pockets.

Some 29 days later, I was sitting in my apartment when I heard a loud crash out front. I looked out the window to discover that my car (and that of a visiting relative) has been demolished by another vehicle—which was lying on its side, having slid down the bank.

Again, I raced to the vehicle over the bank, thinking there might be injuries.

No driver.

It turns out that the driver—quite drunk—had left the vehicle, apparently (and drunkenly) thinking that if he wasn't found at the scene, he wouldn't be charged with anything.

It also turns out that this same driver had previous convictions for drunk driving accidents, including killing a woman in New Jersey in the late 70's.

But he was always able to get his driver's license back.

Why?

Because he was a truck driver for a living.

No one forces anyone to take a drink, smoke, ingest or inject a drug.

And it's about time we stopped treating those who are substance abusers as if they were the victims, in particular those who get behind the wheel of an automobile while under the influence of anything.

Only yesterday

60 Years Ago - Jan. 11, 1935 CRYING BABY SAVES FAMILY FROM FIRE

The startled cries of a one year old baby saved a Harveys Lake family from possible death in a raging inferno last week. The baby, a daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Heiter was awakened last Friday morning by flames which were licking the wall close to its crib. Its frightened cries aroused the parents. Taking the baby from its crib and lifting an older daughter, 3 from her bed in an adjoining room, Mr. and Mrs. Heiter had just time enough to escape attired in their sleeping garments and barefooted.

The water supply at Dallas Township High School on Monday was so inadequate classes were dismissed for the day. At the board of directors meeting that night a committee was appointed to investigate the advisability of obtaining a supply of water from other sources than those now used.

You could get - Chuck pot roast 15¢ lb.; veal steak, 33¢ lb.; round steak, 27¢ lb.; onions, 5 lb. bag 19¢; new cabbage 4¢ lb.

50 Years Ago - Jan. 5, 1945 WOMEN DOUBLE WAR BOND SALES QUOTA

Doubling its \$10,000 quota, Dallas Senior Woman's Club sold \$22,660.25 worth of War Bonds during the 6th War Loan Campaign, according to final reports filed with the County Committee this week.

Fifty-three members were installed into the Dallas Junior Woman's Club at a candlelight service at Lundy's Banquet Room. Following the installation, the club held a dinner in honor of its first birthday anniversary.

S/Sgt. Thomas J. Neyhard, who has been in an English hospital for the past six months recovering from wounds received in both legs and both arms during the Battle of Normandy, arrived home in time for the New Year holiday.

40 Years Ago - Jan. 7, 1955 AREA SCHOOL GETS DRIVER TRAINING

Members of Dallas Borough Council authorized permits for \$18,900 building at Tuesday's meeting in the Borough Building, among them \$2,100 to William Donachie for remodeling of a small home on Lehman Avenue and \$1,000 to William F. Cairl Jr., Woodlawn Drive.

Headline news at Dallas Borough-Kingston Township joint school board meeting was that driver-training program for 53 Westmoreland students is about to take to the road to supplement classroom instruction. Dual controls have been installed in the new Dodge sedan furnished by L.L. Richardson and is ready for the road in accordance with the AAA program which urges driver training in all schools and furnishes the dual-controlled mechanism.

Dean Shaver started drilling operations yesterday to provide water for the first step in construction of the new State Mental Hospital in Jackson Township, and installation of a complete sewage disposal plant. Ground will be broken officially next Thursday at 2 p.m. with Gov. John S. Fine lifting the first shovelful of earth.

30 Years Ago - Jan. 7, 1965 OFFICIALS MULL T.V. CABLE FRANCHISES

The Back Mountain for a second year in a row has the distinction of having produced the first Greater Wyoming Valley New Year's Baby, Phillip Davenport Husband, son of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Husband, Shavertown, checking in Friday at 1:12 a.m. at Nesbitt Hospital, having successfully thwarted the stork for several days.

Municipal officials appear to be approaching the cable TV bid prospects with open minds but there can be some reservations expected on the subject of exclusive franchises which could run 50 years, allegedly to protect their investments.

Gwendolyn Morgan, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. James Morgan, Lower Demunds Road, will submit to open heart surgery Jan. 19 at Children's Hospital, Philadelphia. At least six volunteers Blood group O must stand by at the time of operation. Volunteers will go to Philadelphia two times Jan. 16 and Jan. 17 for cross matching of blood. This precaution is mandated to prevent any possibility of error. Transportation will be provided by Wyoming Valley Chapter of the Red Cross.

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