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Ambushed by Optimism



By Marty Kaplan

Twice in the past few weeks, my train of thought has been hijacked by hope.

I am not by nature pessimistic. But for a while now my mood about America's prospects has been grim. Big money has swamped our politics. Power has been concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. Extremism has been mainstreamed. Fact-based reality has increasingly little bearing on public discourse. Institutions like education, the media and self-governance have grown sclerotic, pernicious and dysfunctional. Faced with looming catastrophes like climate change, we're - oh, hell, there I go again, talking myself out onto a ledge.

But two recent events unexpectedly heartened me, and that they happened in the runup to the Fourth of July has not been lost on me.

The first took place at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. It was a 90th birthday celebration for Norman Lear - a legendary entertainer and a true patriot. He and his wife Lyn are extraordinarily generous. Among their gifts: the endowed chair at USC that I hold, and the grant that launched the Norman Lear Center there, which I direct. I have no doubt that I'd love and admire Norman even if I didn't know him; millions of people do. His energy, acuity and ambition at 90 are awesome. But watching him reach this milestone at the Kennedy Center wasn't what made my face wet.

Though Norman was lovingly fêted that evening, he threw the night's brightest spotlight on the Young Elected Officials network of People for the American Way - 160 community leaders from across the country, all under 35, all driven by a vision of freedom, fairness and opportunity. It was when four of them took the stage to tell their stories that my waterworks began. From Florida, Andrew Gillum, who at 23 became the youngest person ever elected to the Tallahassee City Commission. From South Dakota, Angie Buhl, elected at 25 to the state Senate, the first openly LGBT member of the legislature. From Minnesota, Melvin Carter, elected 10 years out of high school to the Saint Paul City Council. From Vermont, Kesha Ram, who knocked on all the doors in her district twice, and at 22 was elected as the youngest member and the only person of color in the state's House of Representatives.

Their courage to run for office put my moaning about oligarchs and plutocrats into perspective. Their idealism was like kryptonite to Super PACs. When I saw Angie Buhl in the elevator, and told her what a powerful impression she made, she said, "You know, it could have been any one of us up there, and you'd have felt the same way." One-hundred-sixty reasons in that room — and 700 of them across the country — to be hopeful about America.

The other event that melted me happened in the least likely place - the ballroom of the Beverly Hills Hotel. I've lost count of the number of benefits I've attended in that room - all worthy causes, all of whose programs I wanted to flee. But this fundraiser for the Thirst Project was different: I didn't want the program to end.

Five years ago, a teenager from Indiana named Seth Maxwell saw a photo taken by a friend of a misery-afflicted child in Uganda. We've all seen pictures like that; we've all been heartsick and overwhelmed by them. But it wasn't futility that gripped Seth; it was determination, against all odds, to prevent that suffering.

For months he learned everything he could about the root cause of that child's misery: water. He found out that a billion people lack access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. Eighty percent of the world's diseases result from drinking contaminated water; every day, 4,400 children die from those diseases. The long trek to collect water exhausts the girls who do it, keeps them

from school and locks them and their families in poverty. The tools of community development - health, education, agriculture, micro-finance - all depend on solving the problem of water.

“As a 19-year-old college student living in one of the most expensive cities in the world with absolutely no money,” Seth recalled, “all I could think was, ‘What can one person really do?’ I didn’t really know, but I couldn’t live with this new knowledge inside of me and not act.” So he rounded up seven college friends, they pooled all their money - 70 bucks! - to buy water bottles and they took to Hollywood Boulevard to persuade anyone who’d listen that water was life. Seventy dollars became \$1,700 in donations. They used it to rehabilitate a well in Africa. Their passion led schools and churches to ask them to come speak, and in a month they’d raised \$12,000.

So ThirstProject.org was launched. Today they travel to middle schools, high schools and campuses throughout the country, empowering people their age to hold fundraisers of their own. In four years they raised \$2.6 million and funded projects bringing water to 100,000 people in Africa, India and Latin America. They built a board that pays all their overhead costs, which means that 100 percent of donations goes to water projects. They acquired corporate sponsors. They convinced rising Hollywood stars to embrace their cause. And last week, in a Beverly Hills ballroom, they evangelized for clean, safe water and raised nearly \$200,000 more.

That glass-half-full thing isn’t some random metaphor about the future. Seth Maxwell radiates optimism. His charisma, like the mojo of the Young Elected Officials, comes from belief in a better world - the same values that inspired our Founders to pledge their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.

In an ironic age, idealism is scarce; in a new Gilded Age, it’s fragile. But it’s the muscular idealism abounding in a new American generation that got me down from my ledge.

No, not down. I’m flying.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you’d like.

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