

The Other Iron Man: Bill Scheirer (2)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Fun Stuff, Gadfly History, Gadfly's posts September 27, 2018

Second in a series of posts on Gadfly History. The Gadfly seeks stories or suggestions for stories on the Bethlehem tribe of Gadflies. If we had something like Bill White's Hall of Fame, who else would be in it? Eddie Rodriquez, Mary Pongracz, Bob Pfenning, Chuck Nyul, Lucy Lennon?

You see them together a lot in the same quadrant of Town Hall, Stephen Antalics and Bill Scheirer, the “iron men” of this generation Bethlehem gadflies. Stephen on the short side, Bill tall. Stephen, who can be crusty and truculent with Council, Bill always cool, soft spoken, urbane. Stephen in your face, Bill of gentle wry wit. I imagine them playing ball together in the old days in some half-lit Church basement gym. Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside. Stephen the point guard, dervish-like setting the plays, elbowing his defenders, trash talking, creating the openings, Bill, patiently underneath, biding time, counting the broken lights in the ceiling, waiting the pass, finishing it off. We tipp'd our hat to Stephen last time (see Gadfly History #1), Bill now.*

Bill must be a true numbers warrior. When his heavily detailed and impenetrable 400-page budget book, an accountant's dream, damn near caused a riot, Mayor Callahan was forced to produce a slimmed down snappy version for weak-kneed Council. But no watered-down, gussied up version for Bill: “The new document, if [it] gets more citizens involved in the budget process, is a good thing,” he said wisely. “But it can never replace the detailed budget. That is the one I use.” And that's Bill.



Nobody best accuse this mild-mannered man of lacking “stones.” During the ugly democracy-crushing debate over razing Broughal high school, “Professor” Scheirer took to assigning grades to the school directors,

giving them a “C” for their often-chaotic procedures. “These parliamentary grades go on into your permanent record,” he quipped. Bill tempered Mayor Callahan’s enthusiasm over a positive citizen mail survey, indicating wonkily that “the important thing is the nonresponses” and that a random sample of the nonrespondents “should be aggressively pursued, and that if those results differ from those who responded, the survey could be flawed.” Not something His Honor the Mayor wanted to hear.

And during the Broughal debacle he said, “just because other middle schools have athletic fields doesn’t mean Broughal needs them too.” Bada Boom! Run for the hills!

When Bill praised me for good alliteration in the phrase “prayer, pledge, past” I used in some pitch during public comment at Council, I replied, “Ahhh, took a little English along with that Economics, eh!” But little was I prepared for this moving meditation on personal and national tragedy that I found in the old newspaper files.



I thank The Morning Call for the Sept. 9 article on “The Falling Man,” a picture of a person plunging from the World Trade Center on 9/11. It may be the most compelling photograph I have ever seen.

Although it was not appropriate to publish the photo on the first page of the Arts & Ideas section, where eyes that were too young might have seen it, I agree with the decision to publish it the day after the tragedy, for it has a very positive message.

In that situation, most of us would have retreated within ourselves in some corner of the building, cherishing the last few seconds of life, perhaps hoping that the fire would miraculously burn out and that the building would not collapse.

The man in the photo had the strength of intellect to clearly see that was not going to happen. Rather than passively wait for his death, he chose to end it on his own terms, showing the “control” mentioned in the

article. But, it was more than that. It takes strength of character to initiate some action that will almost certainly result in one's death, if one is not suicidal.

In a way, his act was not unlike the courage of the passengers of Flight 93 who chose to take positive action rather than wait to die.

Whatever went through this man's mind, I believe it was an act of self-affirmation, essentially an act of human dignity. He also sent a message to the terrorists: You may hurt us, you may kill some of us, but you will not defeat us.

That, my friends, is something.

Bill Scheirer – economist, community organizer, government critic, preservationist, gadfly.

**Thanks to the files of the Morning Call.*