

## EDITORIALS

# Amazing legacy

One of the more inspiring stories in Harford County's modern era is the history of the organization known today as The Arc Northern Chesapeake Region.

The group, marking its 65th anniversary, started when Harford County Public Schools were still racially segregated and people with disabilities were not always treated with the dignity and humanity they deserved.

That's what The Arc is all about — helping people with disabilities be successful members of society. The Arc NCR is a local chapter of The Arc Maryland and The Arc of the United States.

Arc comes from the group's mission to provide support over "the arc of a lifetime."

In its past, The Arc was the ARC as in the Association of Retarded Citizens, which is telling in its own way, before morphing into the more nonjudgmental Arc, the word, not an acronym.

In 1953, according to a story on the front of Wednesday's PP&T section, the organization started when members of 10 families met in a basement looking for ways to get meaningful education and life experiences for their children with developmental disabilities.

Back then, people with what the nonprofit group now calls "differing abilities," were commonly referred to by what was then acceptable, but now obviously was the insensitive "retarded."

Those were far from enlightened times. Harford County Public Schools would be segregated for another decade. African-Americans, as a matter of course, were referred to in the pages of this newspaper by demeaning and derogatory terms.

Simply put, people who were different were neither always welcomed with dignity, nor treated with respect.

Out of those more Neanderthal days, grew an organization that created a welcoming and supportive place for those young people whose abilities were not fully developed.

It's amazing what grew out of the passion of those 10 families and how many lives they greatly impacted in positive ways since those early days.

"This is an all unique human being with strengths and weaknesses," Shawn Kros, CEO of The Arc NCR, said on the occasion of the group's 65th anniversary. "It is our hope that within another 65 years, as a society, we can leave off labels altogether. We are all simply people."

Continuing to move forward services and create more opportunities for what has been an under-served group of people is the most fitting legacy for the effort started years ago by those 10 families and carried through by countless volunteers through the ensuing decades.

## Superintendent search

While it may be that Maryland education law is ambiguous when it comes to the relationship between local boards of education and their district superintendents, it's pretty clear in one respect when it comes to Harford County: The Board of Education is responsible for hiring the superintendent.

In some, not all, respects — or at least in our opinion — this is the most important statutory function of the nine men and women who serve on Harford's school board. The task of finding and hiring a new superintendent is before them, with Superintendent Barbara Canavan's retirement effective July 1 and they can't afford to make a bad hire, because the future education of more than 37,000 of our county's children and young adults is at stake.

The hiring process needs to be thorough and open as much as possible to the public. It can't be rushed. It needs to be scripted in a way that everyone involved, from the board to every segment of the community, understands upfront how the process will unfold and what qualifications will be required for the next superintendent.

This is not an easy process for a variety of reasons. The pool of candidates experienced in running a school system the size of Harford's will not be large — most districts across the county, except in urban areas, are smaller. There may indeed be good candidates from within the current HCPS administration, or from other Maryland districts, and by all means they would merit strong consideration, all other qualifications being equal — but sometimes far away is better. Harford has gone all those routes in the past, with decidedly mixed results.

But rather than rehash the past hiring history of superintendents in Harford County, good and bad, let's wish the board well in its search and, most importantly, signal our support and willingness to be involved. It's a monumental task, but we think this board is up to doing it well and finding an excellent successor to Canavan.

## An important message

When Averi McCotter, a fourth-grader, and Tracy Morehead, her teacher, joined all of the other students and teachers in an assembly at Fountain Green Elementary in Bel Air last Tuesday afternoon, they had no idea about the news they would be about to receive.

To the joy of those at the assembly, Averi had earned \$10,000 for her school as the winner of a BGE contest to find artwork for the utility to use with a natural gas leak safety program.

Principal Alison Donnelly spoke for the school community.

"We are so excited about this award," she said. "To be the first Harford County school to earn the top prize in this contest is truly an accomplishment, and I could not be prouder."

Five other schools — including North Bend Elementary in Norrisville and St. Stephen in Kingsville — in the Baltimore area each received \$5,000 from BGE in the contest.

This is a good deal for the schools and the company. The fortunate schools get money and public recognition. Fountain Green will be using its prize money to buy laptop computers, the principal said.

BGE gets incredible attention for a very important cause — educating the public not only about the dangers of a gas leak, but also how to recognize one and react to it.

Getting elementary school students involved is a really smart way to get the message out. With so many kids trying to figure out the best way to illustrate the issue, they are inadvertently learning safety tips.

Averi said that in her cartoon she was trying to tell people to not try and find the source of the leak when it's a very natural gas.

"It's important that they shouldn't try to find it because it's dangerous," she said.

It certainly is. And getting that message out is the real point of the contest.

"Get out of the house right away. Don't try to fix it, don't try to turn off the gas," Marc Haines, a safety specialist with BGE, told the assembled students and faculty. "Call 911 or 410-685-0123 [the BGE emergency reporting phone number]."

BGE has created a comic character — Captain Mercaptan — to help get the message to young people. One thing is clear: the odorless natural gas has a smell and it's not a good one. It has smell of rotten eggs is an apt description.

"If it smelled like strawberries, would anybody call 911?" Haines asked those at the assembly before answering his own question. "No. We make it really bad so people call."

That's the important message. We congratulate Averi McCotter and the Fountain Green Elementary School community for winning the competition. And we applaud BGE's continuing efforts to spread such an important safety message.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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ARE YOU READY FOR THE FLU SEASON?

## OPEN FORUM

# Why redistricting is political destiny that should be done fairly, openly and equitably

By DEL. SUSAN MCCOMAS

One of a series of weekly commentaries from Harford County state legislators regarding the 2018 Maryland General Assembly session.

Redistricting is the process where political boundaries are revised to take into consideration the shifts in population measured every ten years by the U.S. Census. If a district loses population and a neighboring district gains population it is important that the new districts fairly represent these shifts to avoid one community gaining influence at the expense of the other.

A community with less population harms those communities with greater population. What has happened with analytics, computers, and sophisticated systems is that politicians are picking their voters as opposed to voters picking their representatives.

The political black art of creating political power through the manipulation of legislative and congressional boundaries, was fathered by Elbridge Gerry, signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation. Originally he was opposed to political parties, but during his second term as Governor of Massachusetts he signed the bill which approved the Essex County district that was shaped like a salamander, the origin of gerrymandering.

A Maryland lawsuit, Benisek v. Lamone is currently before the United States Supreme Court. Former Governor O'Malley acknowledged his goal was to use the power of the Governor's pen to secure another Democratic Congressional seat. Under oath, O'Malley stated, "Part of my intent was to create a map that, all things being legal and equal, would nonetheless be more likely to elect more Democrats rather than less."

Eric Hawkins was tasked to create more Democratic Districts. The tools Mr. Hawkins



Susan McComas

used to accomplish his mandate of seven democrats to one republican were sophisticated mapping software, census data, detailed partisan voting algorithms, meetings with the democratic delegation members, and the use of congressional aides personal email accounts to keep the bosses up to date with his work. There was absolutely no transparency in this process.

The fix was in, but Governor O'Malley's redistricting commission traveled the state on a public listening tour to uphold the charade of transparency and inclusiveness in the redistricting process. The Hawkins map was the final product of the Governor's Redistricting Commission and the General Assembly voted for it. The Redistricting plan was then petitioned to referendum by 56,000 signatures and placed on the ballot. Unfortunately, the Attorney General's Office wrote the narrative for the ballot question and the map was approved by the voters.

In 2017 the legislature passed a bill that has Maryland reform its redistricting process when five other states — New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina — change their process. The bill only deals with congressional districts and leaves the General

Assembly Districts putting the Republicans in as few districts as possible (packing) and placing the Democrats in as many districts as possible (cracking). This dilutes the power and effect of the Republican voters.

Governor Hogan is joining former Democratic Governor Gary Davis to file amicus curiae briefs to support the plaintiff's in Benisek v. Lamone. The thrust of the case is the 6th Congressional District where large numbers of Democratic voters from Montgomery County were included in the Western Maryland District that resulted in Republican Congressman Roscoe Bartlett losing his 20-year Congressional seat to Democrat John Delaney. The Plaintiff argue that the state violated the First Amendment prohibition against individuals because of speech or conduct. Sixth District voters are penalized because of how they voted.

For the third time, Governor Hogan is introducing his Redistricting Reform Act which is similar to his two prior attempts to change the process to a nonpartisan commission. The General Assembly has failed to bring his bills to the floor for an up or down vote despite the fact that Maryland is considered the most gerrymandered state in the country. Governor Hogan vetoed the five state compact bill, and the legislature is holding the veto override until the end of session for fear of losing its grip on the redistricting process.

Governor Hogan is on the right side of this issue and is supported by groups like Common Cause and the League of Women Voters. I am not sure that my Democratic colleagues understand that now is the time to do the right thing and create an independent commission that has no political agenda but to create districts that are contiguous, compact, and communities of interest.