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Politicos, please come home, not phone home

By Leanne Libby

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CORPUS CHRISTI — As my children return to school, we have lots of conversations about getting along with others. Mom Speech No. 8,675: You do not have to be friends with everyone. You do have to be respectful.

This well-worn lecture comes to mind as health care forums across the country take on elements of a tawdry talk show. Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Pa., has been one of the more visible verbal punching bags, greeting apoplectic audience members in meeting after meeting.

Other members of the legislative branch are facing similar ire, as is President Barack Obama.

Here in the Coastal Bend, the most we've warranted so far is the announcement of a Sept. 2 conference call with U.S. Rep. Solomon P. Ortiz, D-Corpus Christi. Not a visit. Not a video conference call. A phone call.

My initial reaction was disbelief. My current reaction is pretty close to the same thing.

I asked Ortiz's communications director, Jose Borjon, about the less-than-positive response to the announcement of the phone format, about why they felt this was the best way to go.

He told me he had no comment.

When tempers flare, I usually want to be Switzerland. I try to be neutral, to sit back and see both sides.

To be sure, health care reform is one of the hottest of hot-button issues we're facing. Many of us do not have health insurance. Those of us who do face rising out-of-pocket expenses. It's upsetting. In cases of serious illness, it's scary.

At the same time, health care meetings have been riddled with dramatic rhetoric. Fear-driven speeches and rumor hog the floor. Rabble-rousing groupies come to make a stink, to see who can be loudest.

It's easy to show up and hurl one-liners at people one doesn't like anyway.

Undoubtedly, bad behavior is a problem. We should be embarrassed. If we adults can't get it together, perhaps we deserve a tightly scripted phone forum.

Except.

Except that a few noisy, political meetings are far outweighed by the many peaceful ones taking place here and across the country on a regular basis. During the last election, presidential candidates Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama visited the area. No problems. On the local level, City Council meetings certainly get spirited. They do not, however, channel episodes of "Jerry Springer."

Health care will pass or fail in Washington, D.C. Here at home, our elected officials are remiss if they aren't spending time regularly, in person, with regular folk, especially on an issue that stands to change lives.

We have right to speak up and speak plainly. We do not have right to disrupt meetings and give legislators an excuse to hide behind a telephone.

Real progress comes when we can sit down as neighbors and talk about divisive issues. Remove the rancor and make a true effort to hear the other side. Find common ground.

We do not have to be friends. We do have to be respectful.

Successfully navigating such change is not likely to happen over the phone.

Elected officials, can you hear us now?

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Shelving Obama's speech failed students

CCISD misses opportunity for kids to hear stay-in-school message

By Leanne Libby

Originally published 01:23 p.m., September 9, 2009

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CORPUS CHRISTI — President Barack Obama mixed White House clout with “Father Knows Best” advice in his Tuesday address to the nation’s schoolchildren.

He encouraged students to stay in school, to apply themselves, to stick with difficult coursework.

Distracting from his message was the realization many of our area’s students were missing the live broadcast because districts chose not to show it. Talk about irony. Obama’s stay-in-school message aired the very day Corpus Christi Independent School District wanted volunteers to staff a reach-out-to-dropouts phone bank.

On Saturday, additional volunteers plan to visit students who have not returned to school. Volunteers are asked, in part, to share their life experience. You know, like Obama did Tuesday. In addition to lecturing students, he talked about being the son of a single mother struggling to make ends meet, about how his life could have taken a different, negative path.

Yet as our city prepares to visit hundreds of homes to try to reclaim the hundreds of teens who drop out every year, the ones just barely occupying desks weren’t getting the message.

“The President’s speech will be archived and made available to teachers whose subject areas would lend to viewing the speech,” read a statement issued Friday from CCISD Superintendent Scott Elliff. “Those decisions will be made at the school level, with attention paid to the local and state curriculum requirements.”

The message emphasized, essentially, what a pain it would be to rearrange schedules for the viewing. I remember televisions hastily wheeled into classrooms so my fellow students and I could watch breaking news coverage of the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger explosion. I’m guessing this wasn’t preceded by a meeting regarding how it fit into curriculum requirements, and I know I wasn’t sitting in social studies class.

Granted, my school wasn't staring down a season potentially filled with flu and already filled with feverish yelps of indoctrination.

"But at the end of the day," Obama said, "we can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, and the best schools in the world — and none of it will matter unless all of you fulfill your responsibilities. Unless you show up to those schools; pay attention to those teachers; listen to your parents, grandparents and other adults; and put in the hard work it takes to succeed."

Sounds like the, uh, indoctrination we try to drill into our kids' heads daily. Sometimes it helps when someone else takes the time to say it. Like a nation's president who happens to be a minority who navigated a rocky youth to his current address.

Students cannot drop out of school and expect to drop into a good job, Obama said.

Isn't that what local leaders have been talking about as we try to keep kids focused on a viable future?

Like most speeches, Tuesday's wasn't perfect. I winced when the achievements speech writers chose to represent my generation — Facebook and Twitter — followed those of previous eras: war victories, civil rights victories and space exploration victories. But isn't analyzing the material part of the lesson?

And yes, thanks to the wonders of the Internet, the speech remains google-able. Like celebrating Christmas in July, however, hazy promises to unearth it later deny students the experience of watching the speech live, of feeling as if the president is addressing them directly.

Parents and teachers never know what will reach a student. Perhaps, on Tuesday, it could have been a presidential address getting through to a student teetering on the edge of failure.

But hey. I'm sure he or she will be motivated enough to skip the fridge and the video games and look it up on their own time.

You betcha.

Leanne Libby wonders what all this political bickering teaches our children. Send bipartisan thoughts to leanne.columnist@gmail.com



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Pink with envy and anxious for a cure

Breast cancer awareness goes into hyper-drive

By Leanne Libby

Saturday, October 24, 2009

CORPUS CHRISTI — For 25 years, October has included National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. This year, I'm hyper-aware pink product placement has gone into hyper-drive.

Please understand: I support saving second base. I've run in Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure 5Ks. I have donated to friends who generously walked all night for breast cancer research fundraisers. I want a world where breast cancer can't maim or kill our mothers, our sisters, our friends.

Yet when I get word, as I did Monday, that a close friend's mom has thyroid cancer and it has spread to her lungs and bones, I wonder whether it's lonely to have a disease unaccompanied by a month of color-coded support.

This year, it's as if the country has been dunked in Pepto-Bismol. We see pink cleats and caps at NFL games. We see pink jewelry. Grocery store aisles are awash in pink. Just when we thought every company had figured out how to market itself as green, they spun the color wheel. Merchants realized there are 31 days when we might be more likely to buy something if it is pretty in pink.

By and large, women are the target of the pink-a-palooza. The message is clear: ladies like to shop. The more we shop, the pitch purports, the more we will help banish the disease threatening to steal the symbols of our femininity, not to mention potentially stealing our lives.

There are hints of a backlash. As pink seeps throughout stores, shoppers are starting to see red. Our pretty little heads worry companies' bottom lines benefit more than those on the front lines of breast cancer research.

Beyond the fleece factor, it's the sense we're pitting diseases against each other. The American Heart Association put country singer Lee Ann Womack in a red dress so she can tell us cardiovascular diseases are the No. 1 killer of women. The conversation deteriorates into one of my-organization's-disease-kills-more-people-than-your-organization's-disease.

When we lose a loved one, the hurt is the same.

Tuesday's City Council meeting featured council members wearing pink T-shirts sold by the fire department, benefiting local firefighters battling various cancers.

What many nonprofits would give to take a page from the astoundingly successful pink playbook. We turn pink for an entire month but turn down pleas for other health-related causes. When I was the Caller-Times' health and medical writer, one of my biggest challenges was the steady stream of requests to cover the day of/week of/month of awareness campaigns for more health conditions than I ever imagined existed.

I'll wager health officials wouldn't mind seeing a month of a color devoted to obliterating obesity. How about a color dedicated to preventing or managing diabetes?

In June, Corpus Christi native Farrah Fawcett died of anal cancer. Local children have inspired foundations for pediatric cancer research. Our sunny climate puts us at risk for skin cancer.

All worthy causes. All probably pink with envy and just as anxious for a cure.

Leanne Libby's column runs Thursdays and Sundays. Contact her at leanne.columnist@gmail.com.



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