

Life in the Past Lane

THIS TIME OF YEAR REMINDS me of a simpler era captured by nostalgic movies and TV shows, such as *Miracle on 34TH Street*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. On the big and small screens, these classic stories and characters endeared themselves to viewers of all ages and are still popular today, thanks to reruns on cable television. Interestingly, in the 249 editions of *The Andy Griffith Show* and the 235 installments of *Leave it to Beaver*, each long-running sitcom only featured one holiday episode apiece, both in their first seasons and both with familiar themes – mercy for mistakes, kindness toward those less fortunate and acceptance of everyone.

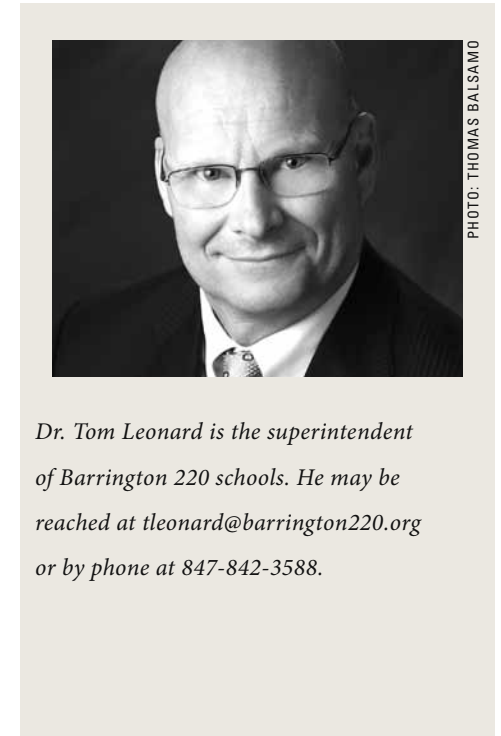
SEVERAL YEARS AGO WHEN I WAS principal of Barrington High School, a student made what we considered an unwise decision. He was a good kid who had never been in trouble before, but he did one of those things that cause you to ask yourself, “What was he thinking?” Fortunately, the incident is history and the student, who successfully graduated from Barrington High School, is currently doing very well in college. I bring it up now because there are elements of his indiscretion that carry a broader message still relevant today.

I remember being briefed by the deans (who are responsible for ensuring an orderly learning environment) that the student did something he thought would be funny but, instead, ended up hurting one of his peers. I scratched my head and half-jokingly asked the three administrators, “Didn’t this kid ever watch episodes of *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Andy Griffin Show*?” Two of the

deans understood exactly what I meant, while the third and youngest member simply looked puzzled.

Those of us who are a certain age were likely raised watching those timeless television shows. *Leave it to Beaver* always seemed to revolve around the same plot: the “Beav,” Wally, or one of their friends would do something without thinking. Things would inevitably go wrong and parents Ward or June – often both – would gently correct and instruct the boys, leading them to a better understanding of how to behave in the future. In *The Andy Griffin Show*, when fresh-faced Opie went astray, typically Andy would sit with him on the front porch and they would discuss the best way to have handled a particular situation.

In those days, sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffin Show* might be watched together by the entire household. Not only did



Dr. Tom Leonard is the superintendent of Barrington 220 schools. He may be reached at tleonard@barrington220.org or by phone at 847-842-3588.

children learn lessons from these idyllic television families, but our own parents often received and reinforced the same messages. Thanks to these black-and-white portrayals, there was a collective imparting of what was right and wrong as well as how to respond to ill-advised actions. Later sitcoms, such as *The Cosby Show* and *Growing Pains*, did the same thing for another generation. Even ABC’s current show, *The Middle*, offers similarly wholesome truisms through a family-friendly storyline.

Reflecting with my high-school colleagues that day, I jokingly suggested the need for a small room in the Dean’s Office with a large-screen TV. If a kid misbehaved, we would pick the particular episode of *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Andy Griffin Show* that was most similar to the student’s situation; we would then require him or her to watch the sitcom quietly in what I wanted to call *The*

Mayberry Room. Then and still today, I am partly convinced such an experience might more effectively change behavior than giving detentions or suspensions.

Like Beaver, Wally and Opie, children still look to their parents as guides and role models. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, coaches and ministers all can play an important secondary role, too. But I'm afraid a third level of support is now mostly lost and forgotten. Media that once taught life lessons each week through wholesome sitcoms, enjoyed by kids and parents alike, has morphed into "reality" TV that glorifies risky decisions and careless behaviors without regard for consequences or principles. Somehow, shows such as *Fear Factor*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Survivor* don't quite carry the same moral cachet as programs from a previous period.

Those of us in Barrington 220 respect our role of partnering with parents and the community to support students so they can grow up healthy and well-adjusted, despite the sometimes inappropriate influences of the world around us. Curricula and coalitions, such as Social-Emotional Learning, Second Step and HERE in Barrington, are redefining success for Barrington 220 students to emphasize strong character, independence, resiliency, critical and creative thinking, problem solving and collaboration – the kind of attributes taught by Andy, Aunt Bea, Ward and June in the 1950s and '60s.

I hope we can re-commit to giving our children the support and life lessons they need – those they can't find any more in a TV sitcom. In the end, we could all benefit from having a *Mayberry Room*. As the hectic holiday season reminds us, slowing down and living life in the past lane can be a good thing. U



KENNETH PETERS DECORATORS, INC.

COMMERCIAL • INDUSTRIAL • RESIDENTIAL



Chicagoland's Premier Painting & Decorating Professionals

- Interior/Exterior Painting • Drywall Installation & Repair
- Faux Finishing • Wallpaper Installation & Removal
- Minor Carpentry – Crown, Base & Casings • Graphics & Murals



Over 30 Years of Quality & Professional Service

847.304.3803
www.kennethpeters.com