

THE PILOT

"A long time ago, a wise editor said, 'The function of a newspaper is "to print the news and raise hell." I haven't been able to improve upon that definition.'"

Sam Ragan, Editor and Publisher, 1968-1996

Our School Board Started This Fire

Crain's Creek Middle School is like a house on fire, and the arsonists are blaming the fire fighters.

What started as a discipline problem common to middle schools everywhere has turned into a raging conflagration fueled by schemers last fall who wanted an election issue to leverage.

They got it and won their election, but now they can't put out what they started. Instead, they shift the blame elsewhere without acknowledging their own actions that have roiled a once-quiet country school.

And thus we have a situation at Crain's Creek where an experienced principal supported by her staff has bailed — more likely has been pushed out for expediency — and at least a third of the teaching and support staff are resigning in protest.

Meanwhile, some parents are still worked up about what they say are ongoing discipline problems and troubles with the learning environment. And no one's happy with how the Board of Education is handling it.

Board Vice Chair David Hensley, who helped stoke the effort last fall to turn Crain's Creek into a crisis, is blaming former "woke" school administrators and board members.

Crain's Creek surely wasn't without problems, but it's amazing how fast the troubles grew last fall, right before early voting started for three Board of Education seats.

Blaming a 'Woke Plan'

By Hensley's measure, it wasn't his alarmist and relentless social media posts, which included videos of fights that allegedly occurred at the school, that got people upset.

It wasn't his own machinations, or those of his backers, and playing up the "We'll crack down on discipline" candidacies of Ken Benway, Pauline Bruno and Shannon Davis. It wasn't the nearby "rallies" before and after school that intimidated faculty and frightened parents. It wasn't allowing repeated comments at public board meetings running down Principal Melonie Jones and her staff.

None of that got Crain's Creek into this situation, by the vice chairman's account.

"The Moore County Far Left and self described 'Public School Advocates' defend the failed woke strategic plan which governed MCS from 2019-2022, when, in fact, it was their "woke" plan which resulted in this breakdown in student discipline and declining academics," Hensley posted on his Facebook page Oct. 11, 2022.

Benway, Bruno and Davis fell into lockstep behind the perceived crisis. They assured parents they'd get tough and fix things if elected. We're all still waiting.

Schools Superintendent Tim Locklair tried to reach out to school staff last fall. What he heard was a warning: There's nothing with Jones. Get rid of her and you lose us.

As one school staff member said on a survey: "The only time that I have felt fear or unsupported is when I hear the things that are spoken by school board members and the community about our school, and seeing the lack of comment from those who know the truth."

Ashes to Ashes

But with the controversy continuing to burn, Jones caught the blame. The school district played it like she asked to take a demotion to assistant principal, but her teachers saw it as scapegoating, and now you have an insurrection.

Even replacing Jones has been a fiasco. Scott Absher, a retired principal, was supposed to replace Jones as an interim, but he backed out the day before he was to report, forcing the district to dip into its human resources staff for a replacement.

Crain's Creek is not without problems. Discipline data show 30 fights there last year, yet it wasn't even the leading middle school in that category. The staff had its hands full, but they were working on problems.

But nuance doesn't work when you're trying to kindle an outrage to win an election. You need to fan the flames and get people worked up.

Sadly, this isn't the only fire burning for Moore County Schools. Before we all fall down, a school board so focused on starting fires might want to find a hose, lest they make ashes of themselves.

Publisher, The Pilot: **David Woronoff**

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LOCAL LIFE: PRETTY IN PINK



TED FITZGERALD/The Pilot

Peach trees in bloom at Highlanders Farm in Carthage

Holding On to the Back Of a Speeding Firetruck

Eleven years ago today, I packed a week's worth of clothes, told the kids I'd see them the following weekend, and headed south out of Greensboro. An hour later, I pulled the Honda Odyssey minivan into the Residence Inn parking lot on Brucewood Road, my home-for-the-time-being, ready to begin a new job as editor of The Pilot.

One of those kids I kissed goodbye is now off on her own out of state, about to start her new job. The other child now has his driver's license, and his own horizons extend outward from here.

Eleven years. Time flies when you're having fun, right? Life can feel like you're holding on to the back of a speeding fire truck. Reflecting in a prior column at the five-year mark, I wrote that I looked at this job with The Pilot as "an off-ramp of sorts to my journalism career."

"I had every intention of moving up, not laterally and certainly not to a small paper in a smaller community. But this was a chance for a fresh start, to be closer to aging parents,

an opportunity to run a newsroom in a business changing almost by the day.

"Well, I got the 'ramp' part right but the trajectory wrong. The past five years have been a steep incline of personal and professional fulfillment. It's been anything but a slow and inconsequential life, as many of you know who come here to 'retire' but find lives fuller than ever."

About the only thing to change in that passage would be amending the number of years to 11. I've been fortunate in this time to work with talented, funny, smart and passionate colleagues who care deeply about what they do. They are the reason The Pilot and its thriving, diverse enterprise have succeeded over the years and grown stronger in an era when other local news media struggle to remain viable or relevant in their communities.

The people across our operation do work that is recognized consistently as among the best in the state and country. That is evidenced by our earning first place gener-

see **NAGY**, page B2



John Nagy
Editor

THE PUBLIC SPEAKING

Kiss and Tell at Forest Creek Road Cleanup

Storytelling and road trips go together like gravy on rice, but sometimes the things we see along the way become the story. That's what happened on Saturday, March 4, when Forest Creek residents performed their first clean-up as new Adopt-A-Highway members. It began with event organizer Susan Hulbert providing section assignments for a 2-mile stretch of Airport Road and asking 20 volunteers to bring back and share their most interesting observations.

Participants encountered a variety of manmade and natural items that sprouted like noxious weeds. Liquor bottles, aluminum cans, cigarette butts, plastic grocery bags and candy wrappers were common, and it did not surprise anyone to stumble on a few golf balls. After all, this is Pinehurst.

We were surprised, however, to find several vape cartridges, a lampshade, a canine skull and a recently deceased red-bellied woodpecker. Those items would have made for an interesting day, but the greatest find was a tightly folded sheet of paper. Unfolding it revealed a numbered list of 46 names with the heading "Kissing List" and subheading "high school." It was unclear if the numbers indicated pecking order or if the list contained suitors sought or already kissed.

The Pilot welcomes letters from readers. Email them to letters@thepilot.com or mail them to 145 W. Pennsylvania Ave., Southern Pines, NC 28387. Letters must include name, phone number and city of residence and may be edited for length and content. The limit is 300 words.

The paper was in good condition and not old enough to have inspired the 1980 hit song "Kiss on My List" by Hall and Oates. As the list circulated through the group of trash collectors, Hulbert said, "Oh man, 46! I haven't kissed that many guys and I'm 69 years old. Things are different nowadays."

The day produced over a dozen bags of trash and recyclables and had all the making of a country song. Participants felt the joy of cleaning up the community, but somewhere out there a student is searching for their "Kissing List," dreaming about their romantic exploits, or pursuing another smooch.

Tom Lillie
Pinehurst

Surprising Reactions

Anyone reading the Feb. 26 edition of The Pilot should be appalled at the article termed "Bill Aims at Pinehurst Moratorium." The article states that state Sen. Tom McInnis filed a bill to limit Pinehurst's ability to institute building moratoriums.

Public hearings are held to determine the fate of the town.

Mayor John Strickland said they followed state laws when they adopted and did extensions on the moratoriums that were in place. The residents were not opposed, according to the mayor.

It should be noted: McInnis moved to Pinehurst from Richmond County in 2021 around the time the GOP did the remapping. McInnis talks about the district and citizens he represents and states they have been abused and that the moratorium currently in place caused him to seek an immediate relief for the citizens of Pinehurst.

The bill proposed by McInnis pertains to Pinehurst and the village. However, new limits on all local governments would not be out of the question, according to McInnis.

As I continued to read, two more articles received my attention regarding our Moore County commissioners and two incidents where antisemitic banners were hung in Moore County.

At the Feb. 21 commissioners meeting, Chairman Nick Picerno said, "Hate has no place anywhere on any subject." He follows that up with it "was really a Vass town issue, not so much a Moore County issue."

Come on, man! Vass IS in Moore County, as are Cameron, Carthage and Little River.

Malcolm Hall
Carthage