

Wilson High School suffers a major loss

VIEWPOINT

MARLENE BERLIN

That is not a sports headline. This is about a Wilson High School teacher who is special to many students, particularly top students, but who has been forced into early retirement. This is about students having special needs. This is about whether those students and the teachers who really push them to excel are valued at Wilson.

There is a disturbing misconception that top students will do OK no matter what. But doing OK is not good enough for Joe Riener, English teacher, girls soccer coach for many years, faculty adviser to the student-run Wilson Players drama group and — in the past few years — faculty adviser to the student-run newspaper, The Beacon.

Students appreciate Joe's commitment and respect his intellectual rigor. Here is a sample of what students have said in letters sent to Joe, Wilson principal Peter Cahall, Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee and Ward 3 Council member Mary Cheh about a teacher who fit them but not the school system:

"I was a member of Yale's Teacher Preparation Program and wrote my senior thesis about issues in urban public education. I went on to receive my M.S.Ed. from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. I plan to devote my life and my career to teaching and urban education reform. Without hesitation, I can say that Mr. Riener was the most devoted and effective teacher that I had at Wilson. He works tirelessly to reach ALL students, not merely those who enter his classroom with a love of writing and literature. Mr. Riener's weekly essay assignments, along with his detailed and challenging comments and feedback, honed my writing skills and prepared me for college-level coursework. As a freshman at Yale, my writing was included in a collection entitled, 'The Best Writing of English 120 at Yale.' Without a doubt, Mr. Riener's teaching is the reason I was able to achieve that distinction." — *Rachel Butler, class of 2004*

"I feel lucky to have gotten the opportunity to know

you. You are the best teacher I have ever had, in and out of the classroom. In many ways, you taught me how to read. You taught me how to analyze, how to dig deeper. You taught me to appreciate Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Camus. ... You also taught me to write. You more than prepared me for college. I can't say that about many of the teachers that I had throughout high school. Wilson and DCPS have made an enormous error. They are letting go of one of the few people that has really made a difference in the lives of their students. You have made a difference in my life. I can't imagine that I would be where I am today without you." — *Julia Baller, class of 2005*

"Mr. Riener is ... the faculty supervisor of Wilson Players, the student-run theater group, which has been a huge part of my time at Wilson. When we say 'student-run,' we mean it: a core group of students, including me, is in charge of everything from selecting plays to hiring directors. Mr. Riener checks in with us to give advice; he builds sets and watches our treasury; but he leaves the key decision-making to us. He expects us to do the work of adults, and we rise to fill his expectations. ... Mr. Riener's leadership is very subtle, but it is his irreplaceable light touch that gives Players its unique and energetic flavor." — *Becky Koretz, class of 2010*

With these student voices ringing in our ears, what does Joe's leaving say about Wilson, this school system, this country? If our schools cannot inspire all students, both struggling and gifted, and push them to do their best, then I worry about the prospects for this country's future.

Lara Winterkorn (class of 2006) says it best, in an e-mail exchange with Chancellor Rhee, who was explaining the care that D.C. Public Schools officials took in designing and implementing the teacher evaluation system. "Sometimes, no matter how well we design the boxes, some things just don't fit into them," Lara wrote. "That doesn't always mean we should throw these things out." Joe was her favorite teacher at Wilson.

Marlene Berlin served as chair of the Wilson High School Local School Restructuring Team from 2000 to 2006.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Voluntary agreements aren't good for city

The D.C. Alcoholic Beverage Control Board is finally addressing a regulatory provision that has been perverted and abused for many years ["ABC Board policy shift sparks debate," July 14].

"Voluntary agreements" are anything but voluntary. Your reporter wrote an editorial, disguised as a news report. The statement that "voluntary agreements are usually the community's best line of defense" seems like opinion, not an objective fact. And it certainly creates a misconception that there is a divide between businesses and the communities they operate in. That's been the position of those small groups of protestants who have abused the system.

There are zoning laws, business laws, Alcoholic Beverage Control laws and regulations, health codes and myriad other city laws and reg-

ulations that cover every aspect of business operations in the District of Columbia. For a business to get and keep the proper license to operate, it must comply with these laws. But a very small number of neighborhood "activists" believe that they know better and should be afforded extralegal remedies when it comes to Alcoholic Beverage Control licenses, i.e. "voluntary agreements."

A quick read of some of these would reveal racist and discriminatory behavior forced on these businesses. Some limit the footwear potential customers can wear (no Timberland shoes, i.e. no younger black people), the type and frequency of music that can be listened to (in Mount Pleasant, no mariachis, i.e. no Latinos), even the menu choices — and on and on and on. Many small businesses, faced with threats of a lengthy and costly "protest" process, eventually sign prejudicial and damaging "voluntary agreements" rather than face bankruptcy before opening for business.

In the case of my business, the

Kalorama Citizens Association, through Mr. Denis James, protested our license renewal for more than 15 months and over seven different hearings, even though Madam's Organ has never had an Alcoholic Beverage Control violation in the many years we have been open. His protest was eventually ruled out, but at tremendous cost to us and to the taxpayers of the District.

The Kalorama Citizens Association (really just Mr. James) has a policy of protesting all new license applications in Adams Morgan. This is wrong, very wrong.

The Alcoholic Beverage Control Board is right to limit both the content of these "voluntary agreements" and the length of time that a protestant can hold up a license application. All of these agreements should be readily available online, and any restrictions that supersede or conflict with D.C. law should be stricken. A more open and transparent process would benefit everyone.

Bill Duggan
Owner, Madam's Organ

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Current publishes letters representing all points of view. Because of space limitations, submissions should be no more than 400 words and are subject to editing. Letters intended for publication should be addressed to Letters to the Editor, The Current, Post Office Box 40400, Washington, D.C. 20016-0400. You may send e-mail to letters@currentnewspapers.com.

From The Desk Of:

Democrat
Mary Cheh
Ward 3 DC Council

Dear Neighbors,

I am proud to have served Ward 3 for the past four years. Over that time, the DC Council has played a critical role in improving education, building stronger and safer neighborhoods, and creating the employment opportunities that everyone deserves.

But so much more needs to be done.

"That is why I have endorsed Kwame Brown to be the next Chair of the DC Council."

He will unify and lead the Council to take us through challenging economic times, address issues of crime and public safety, and keep our education reform movement moving forward.

From working with Kwame over the past four years, I know I can be most effective for Ward 3 and the entire District if he is elected as our new Council Chair. **Please join me on Tuesday, September 14th when I vote for Kwame Brown.**

Councilmember Kwame Brown has the passion, credibility and expertise to move the city past its biggest challenges. I'm excited that he's running and I think that residents across the city will be energized by his candidacy.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Mary Cheh
Councilmember for Ward 3

*** VOTE ***
KWAME BROWN
for COUNCIL CHAIR

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2010

www.kwameforchair.com

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