

Mountain Views

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

—United States Constitution, Amendment One

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COMMENTARY

Todd's trip to China memorable

It was the trip of a lifetime. Imagine if you, a college student, had the chance to spend six weeks in Beijing to help journalists cover the Olympics. Most of your expenses would be paid for. And you might get to rub elbows with Michael Phelps and Koby Bryant.

That's how Helen Todd, a 2002 graduate of Gatlinburg-Pittman High School, spent her summer. The Sevierville resident was working on her master's in marketing at Emerson College in Boston when she applied to be a helper at the summer games. Students from five U.S. colleges were invited to apply for the positions. They were looking for two types: volunteers to help with the Olympic News Service or the Olympic Committee.

Some 150 students at Emerson applied. Thirty-five got to go. "The only requirement was that you be a junior, senior or in graduate school," said Todd. Beijing sent two representatives to evaluate the nominees. Two dropped out, but 33 Emerson students went to China a month before the games began.

Why did Todd apply? "Any excuse to take a trip," she laughed. "It's such an exciting time in China. For the Olympics, China was putting out the red carpet for the world. It was an honor to be part of it and see it all in person."

Todd and many of the others were trained as flash quote reporters, meaning they'd go to the athletes' press conferences after their events and get comments to assist reporters working on stories but unable to attend the press conference live. That's what Todd did for the Paralympics, the event for the physically challenged held in China around the same time as the regular Olympics.

Todd also helped to manage a so-called mixed zone, where athletes would go after they were finished with the games and be interviewed by journalists.

"I made sure everything flowed properly," she said. "We had to make sure the journalists would stay where they were supposed to stay. The athletes would walk through and spend time with journalists."

Emerson turned the experience into a summer credit course for the 33 participants. Todd got her air fare paid for and received a grant to help pay tuition for the course. She and the other helpers were housed in a dorm at the University of China.

"It had toilets, air conditioning and Internet, so I can't complain too much," she said.

She mentioned toilets for a reason. Todd learned how to experience China's squat toilets. American toilets are a couple of feet off the floor. Squat toilets are built into the floor, so you have to, well, squat.

"There's no getting around having to use them in China," she said.

She wasn't too fond of the food served to the volunteers in the Olympic venues.

"Even the Chinese said it wasn't good food," she said. "It came in plastic trays and was precooked. The plastic was melting into the cubbyholes. You could taste melting plastic in the rice."

She was charmed by the Chinese people. Her team of volunteers consisted mostly of Chinese college students who spoke English, but were warm and inviting. More than once Todd was invited to a Chinese home for a meal and conversation.

So did she meet any celebrity athletes? She saw LeBron James from a distance, but she did get to chat with Koby Bryant as everybody was leaving the Bird's Nest stadium after the opening ceremonies.

"I spotted him and walked beside him," Todd said. "He was really cool."

She never saw Phelps. She did see the Great Wall — once on a trip to the spot where most visitors go, and then on a two-hour trip with volunteers to a more remote, seldom-visited section.

It was a terrific trip, one she'll of course never forget but one that turned out to be even more enjoyable and fulfilling than she had hoped.

"A friend of mine in Boston said I wouldn't like the Chinese people because they're mean. In fact they're the nicest people. They went out of their way to be accommodating. I think it was genuine. I'd make a trip like that again in a heartbeat."

Todd, the daughter of Pat and John Thomas and Alvin Todd, has fulfilled her requirements for the master's degree. Now she's looking for a job that ideally would involve marketing and travel. No surprise there.

By the way, she made an A in the class. — Stan Voit is editor of *The Mountain Press*. His column appears each Sunday. He can be reached at 428-0748, ext. 217, or e-mail to svoit@themountainpress.com.



Stan Voit

EDITORIAL

History washing away

County museum building should have been repaired long before now

It is a disgrace that a building that contains so many historical records and artifacts is in such a state of disrepair. Things are so bad water is collecting inside like a small pool, and light fixtures are getting wet which can cause a fire hazard and presents an electrocution threat.

The Sevier County Heritage Museum on Bruce Street in downtown Sevierville is a repository of treasures that date to this county's earliest days. It's all housed inside the old post office, a Works Progress Administration project from 1942.

The county got the building when the new post office was built. It's as if the county has wanted to wash its collective hands of it. Despite warnings and pleadings from those who value the museum's artifacts and place on our society, the county has not committed sufficient money to fix the building and make it safe for the historical documents. At least until now.

The lack of maintenance on the building has led to leaks from the roof that send water and plaster onto exhibits — and visitors who happen to be inside touring. Museum volunteers spend much of their time moving exhibits around to protect them from the worst of the leaks. They must be embarrassed to show visitors the museum when it's in such horrible shape.

Some in the county have suggested the building simply be torn down. A number of county commissioners toured the facility not long ago and have defended its existence.

In the meantime the county's most prominent historical museum is in deep trouble. The flat roof isn't getting any better, and each rain brings with it the fear the roof will finally cave in and damage or destroy items inside. A county museum shouldn't have tarpaulins inside to catch rainwater and protect the items housed there.

Assistant County Mayor Greg Patterson promises work will begin soon. An architectural plan is all that's needed, he says. But why did it have to reach a crisis stage before county government would act?

If the building is beyond repair, perhaps it should be leveled and the museum relocated to better facilities. But if not, if the structure is worth saving, then the repairs should have been done long before now.

A fire decades ago burned many county records and documents. Imagine all of the heirlooms and family treasures that have been lost to hurricanes and tornadoes and flooding. Here is something we can fix, and fix before we lose anything. The problem at the museum is one that could have been taken care of months — years — ago, but wasn't. Let's hope it will be soon, as Patterson pledged, before we lose something we can't replace.

POLITICAL VIEW



PUBLIC FORUM

Buy locally to help our people

Editor: During the upcoming gift-buying season, consider supporting your local businesses, artists and craftsmen. They are a critical part of our local economy.

During the past several months we have talked to many who have seen a decline of 10 percent to 30 percent in revenue since 2007. This has hit the artists and craftsmen, many of whom are operating at the break-even point, especially hard. These good people and their quality work are a draw to many of our tourists.

Tourist business has declined; the locals need to step up and help these people.

Pottery, paintings and crafts here are as good as anywhere and

they are gifts which can become heirlooms. Golfers in the family? Buy a membership in a local golf course. Don't know what to get the mother-in-law? Statuaries have nice ornamental figures to adorn the garden, (not suggesting a concrete pig, of course).

This year, I am going to buy almost all my Christmas gifts from local artists. You are encouraged to do likewise. Just maybe it will make a difference.

Jon Shell
Sevierville

Schools provide help when needed

Editor: Recently at Fort Sanders Sevier Medical Center we had a patient admitted who had some very special needs. He was from out of

state and had suffered a serious injury while here on vacation. He was hearing-impaired and unable to communicate with our staff without his interpreter.

Unfortunately, his interpreter had to leave him for a few hours to attend to some travel arrangements. His nurse and the physical therapist were concerned that he was in pain and did not understand that he could not take any more pain medication for a couple of more hours. Having tried several different methods of conveying that message, his nurse came to me and asked for help with a video interpreting system that we have.

Due to some additional barriers that he had, this system would not work for him. I called the Central Office of the Sevier County Board of Education for help. They were

so helpful in our time of need. Maria Whaley made some calls and within 15 minutes Carol Boaz from the Trula Lawson Center was in our lobby to help.

She went in the patient's room with the therapist and nurse and interpreted the information we needed for him to have. She offered useful suggestions for further communication as well.

One of the advantages we enjoy in Sevier County is the ability to ask our neighbors for help when we need it. The cooperation and quick response from Maria and Carol went a long way to calm this man's anxiety as well as convey important information that he needed to get well. Thanks so much.

Nancy Hodges
Education Coordinator
Fort Sanders Sevier

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