

Among a crew of hard men

* April 23rd, 2011

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By Michael Costello for the Tribune

Commentary

Steven Forge - State Farm

I traveled to Seattle a couple of weekends ago seeking the fellowship of hard men and rediscovered something else that I had long forgotten.

On April 9, Seattle hosted the third annual CatchCon. CatchCon is a convention for fans of the television show "Deadliest Catch." CatchCon allows fans to meet each other and mingle with the captains and crews of the boats featured on the program. There's the Time Bandit, captained by brothers Andy and Jonathon Hillstrand - hard men from a family of hard men. The Wizard is captained by the volatile but hard Keith Colburn. And at the helm of the F/V Northwestern is Sig Hansen, oldest of the three brothers who rule their separate domains on the boat and are descended from a long line of fishermen that traces its origins back to Norway's frigid waters.

Fishing is a profession that attracts a different breed of men from those who grow up aspiring to careers as accountants, lawyers or physicians. The men who make their living on crab boats have more in common with U.S. Army Rangers, Marines and Navy SEALs than they do with college professors.

I was not always the suave, sophisticated, erudite man of letters who stands before you today. I came into this world descended from a long line of hard-rock miners who clawed out a living by busting rocks deep beneath the Earth's surface or in Arizona's open-pit copper mines. They were all hard men. And although early on in my life I decided that I did not wish to follow generations of Costellos into the mine shafts, it never occurred to me that my life would be as anything other than a hard man.

The hard man works hard and relaxes hard. Hard men often live lives that are cut short by the intensity of the lives they lead.

And I was briefly a hard man in my youth. For a little over one year, I was a merchant seaman. I still have my license. The U.S. Merchant Marine attracts men every bit as hard as those featured on "Deadliest Catch." And perhaps one reason that I drifted away from that world was because I lacked the flint required to flourish in that culture.

But I was reminded at CatchCon that hard men have another side. Hard men form bonds unknown to soft men. A loyalty grows among hard men that outsiders can never appreciate. The fellowship among hard men creates a self-enforcing code of honor that must be respected if one is to function within the fellowship.

It's not at all uncommon for soft men to betray one another and still play golf together on weekends. Our political culture is probably the most dramatic example of soft men at work - which is probably why women such as Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, Michele Bachmann and Nancy Pelosi have assumed such prominent leadership roles. All four are tougher than their male counterparts.

The code of honor among hard men requires a humanity that has largely atrophied in the soft world.

At CatchCon, I met Theresa Chestnut, a wheelchair-bound woman who was clearly one of the Northwestern's biggest fans. She wore a custom-made blanket that depicted the Northwestern. Her disability made even talking a labor, but I was able to learn that the art was her creation. The blanket was a gift from friends.

Formal autograph and meet-and-greet sessions with the captains were planned for the 2,000 attendees and the captains and crew drifted through the crowds for informal meetings. But there was no way Theresa could maneuver her chair to take advantage of those opportunities.

Shortly after meeting Theresa I bumped into the Northwestern's captain, Sig Hansen. I plied him for an autograph, but also told him about his biggest fan. He said an effort would be made to meet her.

Perhaps half an hour later, it happened. An area was set aside for Sig and his entire crew to meet the Northwestern's biggest fan. It had to be a highlight in the life of a woman who has learned to treasure such moments more than most. I saw the Northwestern's ultimate hard man, Matt Bradley, blinking back tears.

Can you imagine a rock star, a movie star or a politician doing that unless it was for the benefit of cameras?

We need more, not fewer, hard men to remind us about honor.

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