

Oafish college students erode civil society

William Brock/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

It happens every year, in measures large and small, and it happened again this week: Another oafish performance by students at Washington State University.

Two friends of mine, whom I'll call "Brian" and "Ben," were riding their bikes Sunday on the road to Boyer Park. It was sunny, the birds were singing and my pals were enjoying a pleasant afternoon in the saddle.

Until they encountered the Parade of Fools. A lengthy caravan of vehicles emblazoned with WSU logos, carrying drunken students back to town after a hard day of partying down by the riverside.

My friends rode in single file, squeezed as far to the side as possible, but their presence on the road was met with aggression and contempt.

A black sedan swerved at them, then veered away at the last moment, clearly trying to intimidate them. Passengers in a minivan slid the door open and hurled a bag of something, presumably garbage, in their direction. A lot of people swore at them. A lot of people flipped them off.

Heaping abuse on two random cyclists was suddenly the thing to do.

"Dude, everyone was doing it. Why shouldn't I?"

This is the public face of WSU's student population? Really?

"World Class, Face to Face" be damned. This was "Low Class, in Your Face."

Think I'm exaggerating? Take a drive down to Boyer Park, and have a look at all the beer cans and bottles strewn along the roadside. Maybe a few were discarded by farmers, and maybe a few more were tossed by anglers, but most were flung by college students.

College kids who don't give a damn about anyone.

This column probably will generate a few indignant letters from do-gooder student organizations at WSU. Some will take issue with my broad characterization of undergraduate behavior, which is fair, and others will seek to distance themselves from the drunken boorishness of their peers. To be clear, I'm not suggesting any of the nice young people from the Center for Civic Engagement or the Horticulture Club took part in Sunday's sadly familiar ritual.

I'll also concede that hot weather, combined with dense throngs of young men and women - most of them marinated in alcohol - is a volatile mixture that's hardly unique to Pullman.

You've probably got a mental picture of the college kids I've described. Now take a moment to picture the men on the receiving end.

My friends are well-educated, reasonable guys with a long-term stake in the community. Brian is a full professor at - you guessed it - WSU, and Ben is a physician. They are solid citizens who own their homes, pay property taxes, vote and volunteer in the community. They want to raise their families here.

It takes a lot to ruin their day, but both men were still seething hours after the incident.

I had dinner with them that night, and as their story poured out, I was struck by the parallels with the sexual harassment problems that have dogged WSU in recent years.

The unwanted attention. The crude remarks. The physical intimidation. The implicit threat of violence.

Senior administrators at WSU recognize sexual harassment as a serious issue, and I applaud them for taking meaningful steps to stamp it out. In a similar vein, WSU's chieftains should acknowledge the civic harassment that students inflict on permanent residents.

I'm not talking about townsfolk getting into brawls at a college bar, which is an obvious venue for trouble. No, I'm talking about self-absorbed college kids spewing profanity and graphic sexual language in front of my wife and kids at the park, in the coffee shop or in the grocery store.

It's hard to compel respectful behavior from immature teens and 20-somethings with no stake in the community. Rather than being evil, most are simply oblivious to their coarse behavior.

But allowing them to remain oblivious isn't doing anyone any favors.

William Brock lives in Pullman.