

Reps work hard in Capitol that is hardly working

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

BOISE - Shortly after winning the closest legislative race in the state last fall, Rep. Dan Rudolph of Lewiston discovered a dirty little secret about the news media and truth.

His "light bulb" moment came during the organizational session in December, when he had a chance to meet legislators he'd previously only read about.

Rudolph expected horns and pitchforks. He expected drooling idiots. Because it's what he saw in the news, he expected grim-faced scrooges who hate government.

What he found instead were some of the nicest people you can imagine - warm and welcoming, thoughtful, intelligent, genuine. Rather than "the enemy," he met people he wanted to hang out with, people he'd be proud to call his friends.

The lesson was that, whatever value the news media has in keeping the public informed, it is too often selective in nature. Its narrow focus fails to provide well-rounded portraits of the elected officials who run the state - meaning if people judge representatives based solely on what they see in the news, they will inevitably get it wrong.

My intent here was to try and correct some of those misimpressions.

I was going to tell stories this week - about Dan Schmidt's efforts to break down partisan barriers, about Ken Andrus' decency or Cliff Bayer's sharp wit.

I wanted to write about Vito Barbieri - he of "nullify the federal government" fame, the Dalton Gardens representative who recently wondered, rhetorically, if gynecological exams could be performed by swallowing a pill.

I wanted to point out the good ideas he has for diluting the power of committee chairmen and for increasing legislative effectiveness. I wanted to highlight his awesome sense of humor.

After his gaffe about female anatomy, for example, Barbieri agreed to be interviewed on Idaho Public Television while playing Operation, the children's game where you get buzzed for failing to remove toy organs safely.

Seriously, who doesn't love that? Here's a guy getting bashed nationwide on social media sites who's willing to poke fun at himself. Disagree with his politics if you want, but you have to admire his panache.

That was the type of thing I wanted to write about - their character and humanity. I had such good intentions.

But as this session has shown, the Statehouse is a boneyard of good intentions. Just as political realities have forced legislative leaders to scale back their ambitious hopes for the session, my good intentions were sidetracked as well.

First came the display of religious intolerance by three senators who refused the common courtesy of listening to a Hindu opening prayer, even though they themselves object to any hint of intolerance toward their own religious beliefs.

Then came the temporary leave of absence for Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry executive Alex LaBeau, after his expletive-laced email criticizing a committee chairman became public.

What was most notable about the incident wasn't the email - it was the fact that someone actually suffered consequences for their bad behavior.

Compare IACI's quick response with the Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter administration's handling of the Idaho Education Network schools broadband mess. Despite lawsuits and an ongoing federal investigation, despite millions in unanticipated costs, despite delayed and misleading statements that kept the Legislature in the dark, plus weeks of turmoil while schools scrambled to find an alternative, no one has been fired, no one has been put on leave, no one has been held accountable.

LaBeau is on leave because of a nasty email; taxpayers are out \$8 million-and-counting in federal matching payments and lawsuit costs, yet nobody has even gotten a scolding.

The final event came Tuesday, when teachers opposed a \$125 million pay increase in part because they doubted the Legislature's commitment to funding the five-year plan.

Even as they voiced their doubts, the House Transportation Committee introduced two bills that snag a portion of general fund revenues - in one case up to \$120 million - and dedicate it to road maintenance.

Whether transportation or education ends up being the session's top priority is entirely up to lawmakers, but the real lesson Tuesday was that Idaho citizens are entirely justified in doubting the Legislature's long-term commitment to anything - or at least anything that requires a sustained investment of resources.

So, as much as I share Rudolph's admiration for Idaho's citizen legislators, as much as I wish the media could paint a more accurate picture of these committed and talented individuals who govern the state, this wasn't the week for happy stories.

This was a week for horns and pitchforks - a week, as John Milton said, when the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

Spence covers politics for the Tribune. He may be contacted at bspence@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-9168.

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