

## **Collected Op-Ed Columns of 2013 by Mike Bryson**

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### **A Kindergartner in Every Gun Shop**

4 January 2013

(published as "[Put a Kindergartner in Every Gun Shop](#)" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, p25)

After a week of deafening silence following the Newtown massacre, the National Rocket-launcher Association rolled out its new school safety strategy: placing an armed security guard in every American school. This is supposedly because "the only thing that can stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

In other words -- surprise! -- we need MORE GUNS.

The trouble is, this Wild West-inspired idea isn't very creative or original. And it's bound to be expensive, what with paying for the security guards' salaries, insurance, training, equipment, medical treatment (after in-school gun battles gone awry), and the occasional funeral.

Alternatively, we might consider other slaughter-reduction strategies that don't involve turning our schools into quasi-military installations. Something like this one, which I just thought up. I call it "A Kindergartner in Every Gun Shop."

My plan's a little different from the NRA's approach in that its ultimate goal is fewer guns in circulation rather than more. Better yet, as a voluntary community service program staffed by five- and six-year-olds, it's free.

Here's how it would work. Every kindergarten class in America would be assigned to a gun shop, ammo dealer, firing range, or firearms expo somewhere in the community. Parents and teachers would develop a schedule for the students to monitor each gun-related location -- with one kid at a time working a morning, afternoon, or evening shift -- during business hours. Yes, each child would miss a little school every month, but the public-service experience would be mighty educational.

Customers would be required to do a fifteen-minute "kindergartner check" before buying guns or ammunition. This would involve looking into the eyes of the child, who then asks the adult a series of standard questions, such as "Do you know how many people in Illinois died last month from accidental shootings?" and "Do you really need yet another assault rifle for your collection?"

Assuming the customer still desired to make a purchase, the kindergartner would then run through some basic guidelines on gun safety, including "Don't bring your gun to school and shoot at teachers"; "Never let your surly teenage son mess with your semi-automatic rifle after playing excessively violent video games"; and "Don't point your pistol at your face to demonstrate the safety mechanism, because it might fail and you'll blow your head off."

Skeptics might quibble that elementary schoolchildren aren't truly qualified to lecture adults on gun ownership and safety, since most of them are still learning their letters and numbers. (The kids, I mean.)

True, but kindergartners are really good at talking, not to mention the educational technique of Show and Tell. Some of them, particularly in crime-plagued cities like Chicago and Joliet, could offer real-life lessons in how their older relatives died in gun battles, or shot themselves accidentally, or got thrown in jail from blasting someone else. Such anecdotes can really liven up an otherwise dry lecture on firearm safety.

I see one drawback to my plan, though. Assume that the thousands of gun dealers in our country are each open for 50-60 hours per week. Even with little Sally and Bobby pulling double shifts at their local bazooka retailer, those are a lot of business hours to cover.

I'm a little worried that at the rate that children are getting mowed down these days in our schools, we won't have enough kindergartners to go around.

*Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) of Joliet welcomes other ideas to curb gun violence in America.*

## A Personal Letter to Midwest Generation

7 February 2013

(published as "[A Promise To Get It Done -- One of these Years](#)"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, 4 March 2013)

Dear Midwest Generation:

I admit it. For a long time I've assumed that you were nothing but a bureaucratic, ethics-challenged, profit-obsessed energy company. But your recent pleas to the Illinois Pollution Control Board for sympathy and understanding regarding your supposedly tardy efforts at environmental compliance have truly touched my heart.

After all, you've owned the coal-burning Joliet and Romeoville power stations since 1999, which practically feels like yesterday. That's hardly time enough to implement industry standard pollution-control upgrades as dictated by the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and other annoying environmental laws written by people overly fixated on sulfur dioxide emissions or airborne particulate matter.

Burning coal generates electricity for us, which we love, and quite a bit of money for you, which you need. Hey, power company executives gotta eat, too, don't they? After all, electricity production isn't a charity endeavor -- that would be (gasp!) socialism.

But making a profit in your business is tough these days, what with your outdated and inefficient power plants in Will County spewing so many pollutants that require "scrubbing" and various "mitigations." Some of your chief critics -- like Citizens Against Ruining the Environment, the Sierra Club, and the Illinois Attorney General's office -- don't get that. They just keep whining that your coal plants are old and dirty and unhealthy.

C'mon, already. A little dirt never hurt anyone, except maybe a few finicky armchair environmentalists. You don't hear the tens of thousands of working class and minority citizens living downwind of your coal plants complaining, do you?

I would remind people that you did a pretty nice thing last year when you closed those two legitimately old coal-fired power plants on Chicago's Southwest Side -- the Fisk (built in 1903) and Crawford (1924) stations. For most of thirteen years after you bought them, you studiously ignored longstanding protests by neighborhood environmental watchdogs, ultra-liberal aldermen, and grandstanding green organizations. But once you finally determined that those old-timer plants weren't going to turn a profit anymore if you installed their required upgrades, you quickly and decisively shut them down.

That was brave. So was letting all those Fisk and Crawford plant workers go. That's why I'm sure that if and when the time comes to "release" the workers from your barely middle-aged Joliet station (which currently emits far more pollution than those old Fisk and Crawford plants combined), you'll find a way to pull the trigger.

As for eventually complying with these new environmental regulations on sulfur dioxide? I'm grateful for your promise to get to it some year.

So shame on those ladies from CARE and those Sierra Club treehuggers and Pollution Board pencil pushers for badgering you with complaints, lawsuits, op-ed articles, scientific studies, mortality statistics, medical expense projections, probing questions, and other distractions. I wish they'd give a chronic and habitual polluter like you some credit for trying to reform itself. It's obvious you're trying, really trying.

Heck, by 2025 or so I'm sure you'll have our Joliet smokestacks clean as a whistle.

*Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) lives in Joliet, about three miles as the smoke drifts from the Joliet 29 Generating Station on Route 6 operated by Midwest Generation since 1999.*

## **Joliet's Not a (For-Profit) Prison Kind of Town**

17 March 2013

(published as "[Time for Joliet To Lose Old Prison](#)"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, 18 March 2013)

As my family and I drove over the river to Joliet's East Side, I had little idea what to expect at our Collins Street destination -- a fundraiser by the local grassroots organization Concerned Citizens of Joliet. All we knew was that the gathering was for a good cause: raising awareness about and galvanizing community resistance to a for-profit immigration detention center being built here in Joliet.

As soon as we entered Azteca de Oro banquet and dance hall, though, I sensed instantly that it would be a memorable evening. Friendly greeters directed us to a comfortable table right next to the dance floor, which thrilled my two girls. A boisterous Mariachi band was in full voice from the stage at one end of the hall, while at the other end happy folks mingled and laughed at a well-stocked bar.

And the food! Long buffet tables full of stewed chicken, sautéed beef and vegetables, rice, refried beans, tortillas, salads, and sweet treats beckoned, and I'll admit we weren't shy about asking for seconds.

But the best part of the evening was the music and dancing, of which there was a glorious abundance. Musical acts of all stripes and colors entertained the swelling crowd, including the inspiring gospel of the Mt. Zion Tabernacle Choir, the witty folk/pop/rock stylings of singer-guitarist Dan Droogan, and the hot salsa of the Sangre Latina dance band.

This joyous music from musicians black, white, and brown filled the hall as dozens of children took to the dance floor to run, skip, chase each other, play hide and seek, and make new friends. Soon the hall's lights came on in their full resplendence, and the adults joined the kids in what became one of the most festive scenes I've witnessed in a long time.

But the spoken word, both Spanish and English, was part of the program, too. Local politicians and community organizers took the stage to decry the prospect of an immigrant prison here in Joliet. As I contemplated their message of critique and concern, I reflected on the irony of our location. Just a stone's throw from us on Collins Street was Illinois' ultimate penal icon: the Old Joliet Prison, decommissioned and deteriorating since 2002.

Yes, Joliet might someday make some money from its undeniably long prison legacy, though that civic identity has always been problematic for us. But not, I hope, through the construction of a for-profit immigrant "detention center" that is dedicated to the pocketbooks of its owners rather than the welfare of its detainees -- most of whom will be our Hispanic brothers and sisters.

Instead, we should look north from Azteca de Oro and do something productive with the Old Joliet Prison before its massive limestone walls crumble to the ground. Expensive, yes -- but interpretive signs in the parking for Route 66 tourists don't fill the tax coffers, either.

No, folks -- we don't need another prison here. Certainly not one focused on pieces of silver rather than social justice. Joliet's ongoing flirtation with such a prospect should be closely monitored and vociferously protested by all people of conscience.

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**All's Fair in Love, War, and Science Education**  
12 April 2013  
(published as "[Kids' Science Fair Not for Faint of Heart](#)"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, 23 April 2013)

The great poet and critic T. S. Eliot once wrote "April is the cruelest month." I'm unsure what he had in mind exactly. But it quite possibly could have been an elementary school science fair.

As a professional educator, former biology major, and avowed science geek, I admit the following with considerable guilt and associated feelings of hypocrisy: *I am so, so glad that my daughter's science fair project is done.*

These undertakings aren't for academic wimps. At Eisenhower Academy here in Joliet, each kid must research a topic, write a formal paper, design an experiment, assemble materials for their procedure, collect and analyze data, and present their results on a colorful three-panel poster complete with typed text, pictures, data tables, graphs, and a bibliography. Oh, yes -- and give an oral report, too.

That's a lot of work for ten-year-olds, most of whom would rather be climbing a tree or yelling loudly during their precious after-school time, instead of toiling in the service of science.

We adults are in on the fun, too, for there is no way most kids can pull off such an involved and complex research project on their own. Consequently, parental help is guided and encouraged by Eisenhower's teachers, who helpfully provide research guides, assignment checklists, grading rubrics, sample data graphs -- even a required parent-student orientation session two months before the final project is due.

This means that parents have to navigate the tricky line between not providing enough help and doing too much of the project ourselves. Somewhere between these two extremes is a demilitarized zone of Appropriate Parental Assistance -- and trying to stay in that zone without going crazy may well be one of the key science fair learning outcomes for each family.

So am I sorry that my older daughter had to do a science project this year here in Joliet's District 86?

Hmm. No, I guess I'm not, when you really get down to it. Despite all the work involved and all the stress it can create, the project is a good thing on the whole.

I know this because of what my daughter said to me over breakfast the day before her poster was due. We had been working late the night before, importing our data tables and graphs from an Excel spreadsheet into a Word document for final printing (yes, fifth graders do such things these days), and as she ate her food before catching the bus, I asked her if she felt the science fair project was worthwhile.

"Oh, sure!" she enthused, between giant mouthfuls of noisy cereal. "My topic is awesome. And we learn how to design an experiment, and collect data, and make cool graphs. You know, Dad, the jobs of the future will be STEM-related, so the more science we get early on, the better."

My jaw fell open and I spilled coffee on my shoe. She's invoking STEM education and career development in breakfast conversation now? (That's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math for those unfamiliar with the acronym.)

"Besides," she continued after noticing my stunned silence, "doing the experiment is super fun!" (Munch, munch, munch.) "Hey, these Atomic Crunchers are good. Can we get a bigger box next week?"

After that job you did on your science fair project, kid? You bet.

*Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) commends the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade students and science teachers at Joliet's Eisenhower Academy for their outstanding work at this year's Science Fair.*

## **Ain't Nobody Here but Us Chickens**

18 May 2013

(published as "Backyard Chickens in Joliet" in the Joliet *Herald-News*, 5 June 2013, p15)

Question: What do the northeastern Illinois communities of Arlington Heights, Batavia, Chicago, Downers Grove, Evanston, Hoffman Estates, Naperville, Northbrook, Oak Park, Plainfield, and St. Charles have in common with Cincinnati, OH; Nashville, TN; Pittsburgh, PA; Sioux City, IA; and Topeka, KS?

Answer: All of them allow city residents to keep backyard chickens for egg production.

Here in Joliet, there's a grassroots movement aflutter to legalize residential chicken-keeping, a plucky proposal I enthusiastically support.

The virtues of city and suburban backyard hens are many and various. As noted by the local advocacy organization J-Hens (Joliet Healthy Eggs in Neighborhoods), urban chickens:

- provide fresh and nutritious eggs that are far superior to most purchased in supermarkets (I know; I've tasted 'em);
- recycle food waste by consuming kitchen scraps and producing valuable compost for gardens;
- tap into the historically significant American tradition of backyard hen-keeping; and
- are fun family pets that provide our technology-distracted children with animal companionship, healthy outdoor activity, and instructive caretaking chores.

To be sure, uninformed naysayers wrongly assume that backyard chickens are dirty, noisy, and detrimental to local property values. I do know many so-called humans who fit such a description, and I bet you do, too. But not our dirt-scratching, bug-eating feathered friends. (Yes, folks -- chickens love to eat bugs. What's not to like about that?)

Let's start with the property value myth. First of all, the irresponsible wrongdoings of many American financial institutions have wreaked exponentially more havoc upon the local housing economy the last five years than anything a few little hens down the alley could ever do.

Secondly, just look again at the list of cities above: does anyone really believe that the affluent communities of Arlington Heights, Evanston, Naperville, and the regulation-obsessed Oak Park -- all cities with *far* higher average home values than Joliet -- would've approved their backyard hen ordinances if property values were truly at risk? I rest my case.

What about the chicken poop? you ask. Won't it be stinky? Of course it will -- IF YOU DON'T CLEAN IT UP. Again, let's get real. Our present-day urban landscape is constantly bombarded with doggy doo-doo from the tens of thousands of dogs slobbering along in our midst and treating our lawns and parkways as their personal bathrooms. These putrescent pooch piles are large, stinky, and messy -- I know because I've cleaned a lot of them up in my 45 years. But do we outlaw the keeping of dogs as household/backyard pets because of their daily defecations? No -- we simply expect their owners to deal with the waste properly.

And as for alleged noise problems: we're not talking roosters here. Hens are quiet and unaggressive compared to those preening and caterwauling males of the species, not to mention yappy canines and loudmouth people. (You know who you are.)

If Joliet really wants to deal with urban noise issues, I suggest the Council turn its attention to the bass-thumping car stereos that rattle my teeth and jiggle my liver as I sit in my vehicle waiting for the spotlight to change. How about an ordinance against those aural abominations?

More backyard chickens. Less liver-jiggling noise pollution. Now that would be progress!

*Joliet resident Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) encourages all forms of urban gardening and farming, especially in his hometown, and recommends the J-Hens website ([j-hens.org](http://j-hens.org)) to readers near and far. He also loves doggies and his fellow man, contrary to what this article might imply.*

## **Back to School Reflections in Joliet; or, Junior High Doesn't Have To Be a Living Hell**

written 7 September 2013

(published as "Junior High Doesn't Have To Be a Living Hell"  
in the Joliet *Herald-News*, Sunday 15 Sept 2013, p26)

As Labor Day recedes sadly into the distance and we come to grips with the fact that, yes, another school year has officially begun, I can't help reflecting on the pervasive and damaging myth within American educational culture that junior high is a terrible place to be -- something to be survived, not enjoyed.

Sure, the sheer size of a big junior high school is intimidating at first. Yes, there are bullies, and they hit harder than they did in grade school. And there's no doubt that adolescents can be obnoxious and hurtful, especially when it comes to teasing and tormenting their weaker, geekier, or more awkward peers.

But junior high also can be a place for kids to have fun, to mature into their new minds and bodies, to make new friends, and to relish that time of innocence before the reality of working a part-time job or sweating over college applications. Junior high is, in fact, the last sweet time of true childhood -- a realization that occurs to me now as a middle-aged parent.

I suppose that my rosy view of junior high is somewhat colored by own mostly positive experiences growing up in Joliet, where I attended Hufford several, um, decades ago. As a short kid who wore goofy-looking glasses, favored brown corduroys, sported hair that refused to "feather" properly by late 1970s standards, and was universally known as a bookworm, the odds of my fitting in and avoiding physical trauma weren't exactly favorable. So how was it that I actually enjoyed my junior high school years, let alone survived them with all of my teeth intact?

Here's the secret.

Early on in sixth grade, I joined the school's long established and much-ballyhooed Drama Club, which convened during school hours just like band, orchestra, or choir. Every day thereafter, I lived for tenth period, when our teachers Jack Prendergast and John Nordmark brought us into what to me seemed like an entirely different and wonderful place: the World of the Stage.

Sixth through eighth graders worked, learned, and joked together in this alternate world. We practiced monologues and scenes; competed in speech contest every fall; tried to one-up each other at every audition; and put on a fall play and a full-blown spring musical. In the process, we honed our oratory and acting skills and . . . perhaps most importantly . . . learned how to mount the stage with confidence, take risks, and deal with failure.

To this day, I have had few tests of personal courage that matched that of having to kiss the leading lady in our Spring 1981 production of "Bye, Bye, Birdie" in my eighth grade year, while 400 screeching and hooting adolescents raised the roof of Hufford's auditorium in hormone-fueled delight at the spectacle.

So here is my advice to all the junior high schoolers out there, assuming you're precocious readers of this newspaper:

(1) Join something. Band, orchestra, choir, drama, scholastic bowl, chess club, basketball, volleyball, cross country -- whatever it is, try it out and see if it suits you. This is a good way to make some friends outside of the hot lunch line.

(2) Be yourself. Just because you join a group doesn't mean you have to become a sheep. Hey, America is all about celebrating the individual! So I say, go gonzo with that Mohawk.

(3) Don't take any crap from bullies. Even if you're small. Remember, little guys are dangerous, especially if they're smart enough to make big/older friends. (See #1 above.)

(4) Enjoy your time there. I'm sad to report it'll be over in a blink of the eye. And when you get old like me, you just might miss it.

*Joliet resident Mike Bryson ([mbry22@sbcglobal.net](mailto:mbry22@sbcglobal.net)) is a 1981 graduate of Hufford Junior High School, where he first learned to diagram a sentence, bake a cake, operate a jig saw, draft designs for a building, give a speech, solve algebra equations, and square dance.*