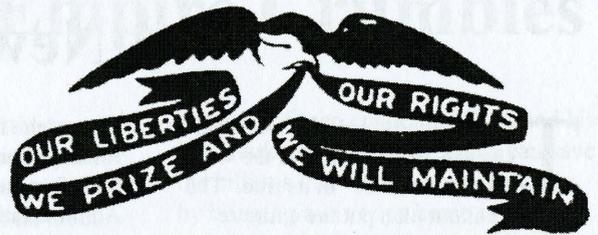


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Fall 2008

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Working the Society Beat

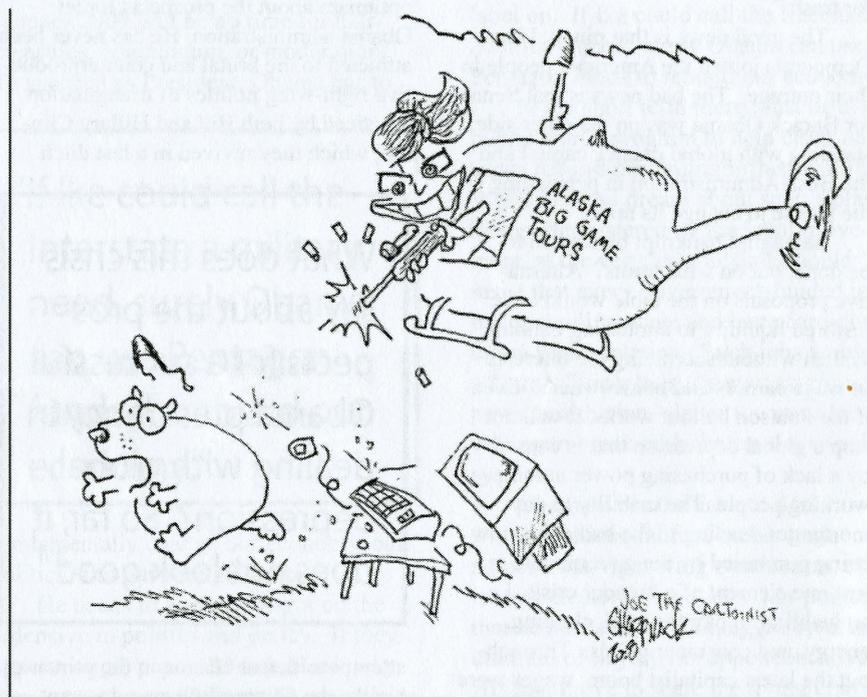
My first job as a columnist was given to me by Glen Miller Epstein, who died in Iowa City on October 20.

The job was a high-prestige position and a rare opportunity, Glen told me. The pay was the same as currently offered by the Prairie Progressive.

The Iowa Defender was the name of the newspaper, edited by Glen in the back room of The Paper Place, the legendary Iowa City book store on Clinton Street, managed by Glen for its owner Gerald Stevenson. Sharing occasional time behind the cash register was Glen's brother Harry James Epstein.

The Defender was primarily a serious political journal, and Glen assigned me to report on local rallies, protests, and meetings. He also asked me to cover weddings, like the one on Black Springs Circle where the bride and groom both wore flowers in their hair while brother Harry provided musical accompaniment with an aluminum pan and a wooden spoon.

After several similar pieces, including one which described -- at Glen's suggestion -- the fashions worn at a Cream concert in Des Moines, Glen placed me on the masthead as 'Society Editor.' I was young and enjoyed seeing my name in print, so it was easy for Glen, seven years older, to convince me that the title of Society Editor held multiple layers of meaning. He encouraged me with an occasional complimentary beer at



Donnelly's Tavern where -- after my fake driver's license had been approved in the dim beam of the bartender's flashlight -- I sometimes wrote my columns.

Glen so loved letters to the editor that he often wrote them himself. He would then try to goad me into what he called 'cat-fights' with letter-writers both fictitious and real. "You can't let him get away with saying that about your column!" he would exhort me, literally rubbing his hands together and cackling like Margaret Hamilton in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was hard not to succumb to

the demands of such an enthusiastically demented mentor.

I've written a column or two in the years since then, but none under circumstances as entertaining and memorable as the ones I wrote at Glen's behest. I'll always think of that job with *The Defender* as one of my highest-prestige positions. It gave me the rare opportunity to become friends with a unique artist, comedian, and shrewd observer of society named Glen Epstein.

— Dave Leshtz

A New New Deal?

This fall the House of Representatives justified the use of the word “representatives” in its title. The Paulson bailout plan put the entire resources of the federal government at the service of the owners of global financial capital. The overwhelming majority of the American people saw through this, and their outcry was so loud that the House voted down the plan, described by Representative Dennis Kucinich as “cash for trash.”

The good news is that ninety House Democrats joined the American people in their outrage. The bad news is that Senator Barack Obama was on the other side, standing with global finance capital and the Bush Administration in persuading the House to change its mind.

Salvaging bankrupt banks had to be done, but on what terms? Alternative proposals on the table would have restored liquidity to a tottering banking system without sacrificing the interests of wage earners and homeowners. Even if the Paulson bailout works, it will not stop a global depression that is caused by a lack of purchasing power among working people. The inability to pay mortgages, leading to the bad debts now being purchased by the government, is just one element of a broader crisis, i.e. an inability to pay for food, clothing, energy, and consumer goods. Throughout the latest capitalist boom, wages were held down relentlessly through union-busting, global free trade agreements, and the racist persecution of working people when they ran afoul of immigration laws. Inequality grew, accompanied by a global wave of capitalist propaganda which blamed unions, immigrants, regulation, the welfare state, and even food subsidies as obstacles to even greater growth and even greater profits.

What does this crisis say about the prospects for a successful Obama presidency in dealing with global depression? So far, it does not look good. Standing beside Obama to defend the Paulson plan were two of the most important archi-

itects of the financial collapse of 2008, Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, both Treasury Secretaries in the Clinton Administration. Although disheartening, it is not very surprising that Obama would turn to the foxes for advice on how to protect the hen house. Readers of *The Audacity of Hope* will know that he has always been a neo-liberal supporter of capitalist globalization.

There is, though, some basis for optimism about the prospects for an Obama administration. He has never been attracted to the brutal and counterproductive right-wing politics of triangulation practiced by both Bill and Hillary Clinton, which they revived in a last ditch

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attempt to defeat Obama in the primaries. Unlike the Clintons, Obama does not regard the progressive wing of his party as a permanent enemy to be destroyed at all costs in the pursuit of power.

If he wins, Obama will come into office on a great wave of euphoria over the end of the horrors of the Bush administration, and pride at seeing an African-American walk through the front door of the White House. But will he be, in Colin Powell’s phrase, a “transformational” president? Obama is by temperament a conciliator who likes to split the difference between opposing sides, and govern from the middle. In the end, though, the economic and military

crises we face are too severe to address without decisive action.

Will there be a progressive opposition to an Obama administration, ready to play political hardball in order to oppose the Rubins and the Summers when they argue that there is no alternative to putting the interests of global capital ahead of the interests of working people? Will those members of the House Progressive Caucus who opposed Obama on the bankers’ bailout be there to put pressure on an Obama administration, or will they just fall in line in the euphoria of having Democratic control of government for a change? Will Obama be able to pursue the utterly unwinnable war in Afghanistan, which could destroy the credibility of his administration with the American people, without any Democratic opposition? Will he proceed with his disastrous health insurance plan, doomed to fail just as the Clinton plan failed and for the same reasons: it is not universal, and it is means-tested?

There is a great deal at stake in the answers to those questions. They will determine whether Obama will go down in history as another Franklin D. Roosevelt, or another Bill Clinton. The ninety house Democrats who defied Obama when he took the side of global capital need to be ready to defy a President Obama when he puts the interests of finance capital first, pursues unwinnable wars, and falls short on universal health insurance. They need to hold him to his promises to renegotiate trade agreements and decisively strengthen the power of labor unions. If they do, and Obama pays attention, he may truly become a transformational president, presiding over a new New Deal.

—Jeff Cox

Playing Offense as the Empire Crumbles

As Bush cowers in a White House closet, his empire crumbling around him, and the campaign to replace him sputters to an end, I fear two things. First, that the authoritarians win by stealing a third election, and second, that Barack Obama wins, but succumbs to the defeatist yammering of centrist Democrats, the media, and enraged fundamentalists.

I pray that Obama fights much harder if the election is marred by the open corruption that is the hallmark of the GOP. I hope people take to the streets in protest and demand a recount. Remember the effect of a few paid Republican operatives pounding on the doors when the Gore vote was being counted in Florida?

If a few hundred thousand real Americans, as opposed to the extremist thugs that Palin celebrates, showed up in D.C., maybe Congress and the Supreme Court would think twice about blessing yet another stolen election and the enshrinement of permanent corporatist rule.

However, Obama is going to make history by overcoming the racism and xenophobia of the putschist attack machine, the hopelessness of eight years of Bush misrule, and even blatant election thievery. Obama will take office, like FDR and LBJ, with a mandate to get things moving.

No matter how many states Obama carries or Congressional seats he picks up, there will be an incessant drum-beat of voices claiming that he cannot do anything radical, or that hurts the feelings of quasi-Democrats and their allies in the GOP. The media will also bray about needing to seek consensus and to govern from the center.

Remember Bill Clinton's 1992 promise to put people first? He cast it aside when George H.W. Bush revealed the true state of the economy after the election. Instead of forging ahead with a comprehensive and progressive program, Clinton opted for an unpopular party line tax increase. Then he and Hillary Clinton developed a monstrous plan to

force us all into HMOs rather than try for a simple, single payer healthcare system. In short, Clinton listened to the nay-sayers, trimmed his sails, and got no credit for cleaning up Bush's economic mess.

Obama must avoid this pitfall by framing a unified plan to overcome problems that corporate rule has allowed to fester for decades. Then he has to challenge his opponents to join him or run them over politically if they do not. January 2009 will be no time for half-measures, conciliation, or moderation. To succeed as President, Obama has to

"If Ike could call the Interstate a military need, surely Obama can use Pentagon funds to rebuild our economy."

fundamentally change our economy, our politics, and our foreign policy.

He needs to keep the Right on the defensive in politics and policy. If they oppose single payer, he should ask why they want to waste billions on emergency room visits. If they want to continue the war in Iraq, open a recruiting station on Capitol Hill. In short, Obama needs to be far tougher than the GOP hit-men and corporate shills.

On health care he needs to go for one system, based on Medicare, with physician choice, complete portability, and the federal government paying the bills. It will be much simpler to expand an existing program that all families have experience with, than to try and please all the players with a new one.

The daily struggle to survive in Iraq has been replaced as an issue in the campaign and in the papers by the

economic fiasco created by Bush and his free market ideologues. Obama can save the billions that we are wasting in Iraq by bringing our troops home immediately or by sending some to Afghanistan to fight the resurgent Taliban. Bush's plans for another generation of nuclear weapons should be scrapped and the money invested in economic conversion, alternative energy, and anything else you could slap a "national economic defense" label on. If Ike could call the Interstate a military need, surely Obama can use Pentagon funds to rebuild our economy.

In the short term there must be a public works program to help cities and states rebuild our failing infrastructure. While one can dream about such a plan being administered by the labor movement, at the very least Obama should insist that every government-funded job pay prevailing wage and have card-check union representation. Such jobs would also enroll people in the new single payer health plan—labor too must be willing to break with the employer-paid system.

Obama will also have to deal with racial inequalities, unfair trade agreements, right wing obstruction, eliminating electoral fraud, etc. My point is that he needs to be bold, aggressive, and unafraid of flaying his opponents alive. His first move to scare the living crap out of the rightists should be to turn over the White House torture memos approved by Bush and Cheney to an international war crimes tribunal.

*— Duncan Stewart pals
around with librarians.*

A Life of Action

Eastern Iowa has lost a great leader, a courageous voice for the powerless and a heroine and role model for us all, Beth Wehrman of Le Claire. Beth was a nurse and a trailblazer in her field. She was one of the first Executive Directors of AIDS Project Quad Cities, and founded LifeGuard, working as a “street nurse” providing harm reduction services for people at risk for AIDS. She was also the first female volunteer firefighter for the City of Le Claire Fire Department. The mother of four daughters and grandmother of eight, Beth was an unconventional woman in so many ways, as she took on the responsibilities of the ‘average’ American woman of her time and made them her own.

As a street nurse, Beth took her work to where the disenfranchised live, under bridges, in crack houses, and other such places that sometimes gave her family pause. She was recently awarded an Alumni Award from Marycrest University for this work, and on September 15th celebrated her 56th birthday.

I met Beth in 2005 when she became one of the leaders of Progressive Action for the Common Good. She was an active member of the Civil Rights Forum and the Reclaiming Moral Values Forum, and helped with leadership training for PACG. She was a thoughtful and energetic participant in PACG’s efforts. Beth was beloved and admired for her community service, her compassion, and her commitment to being a voice for those less fortunate.

Beth’s most recent passion was working with the grassroots movement to nominate and elect Senator Obama to the Presidency. She was one of Barack’s earliest supporters in the Iowa Caucus effort and adopted one of our favorite field staff, Tripp Welde, who is now running the statewide field effort for the Obama campaign in Iowa. Beth was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer last November. She fought with determination, strength, and courage, enduring arduous treatment with the great support and care of her

amazing husband and four grown daughters. Senator Obama was one of the first people to call Beth while she was at Mayo right after she got her diagnosis. She continued to work for Barack over the past year, until she began to grow more ill late this summer.

When Senator Obama was in Davenport on August 25th to talk to undecided voters, Beth’s husband Randy Wehrman introduced Obama at the rally and spoke about why he, as a Republican, is supporting Barack.

Beth had checked out of the hospital against medical advice to attend that rally. At the end of that week, she

“As a street nurse, Beth took her work to where the disenfranchised live, under bridges, in crack houses, and other such places that sometimes gave her family pause.”

received the bad news that the chemo was not working, and was started on hospice care at home. The major concerns that she shared with me over those first sad weeks were that she could not be working for Barack and that she would not live long enough to vote and to see Barack elected President. I promised her that we would organize hundreds of people here to work for Beth (which we did in a huge GOTV effort, Beth’s Day of Action, on Oct 25th).

The intervening weeks were a roller coaster of ups and downs as Beth determinedly clung to life. She had

seemingly been close to death many times during this last month, which was excruciatingly difficult for her husband and four daughters, but they kept her at home as she wanted and took better care of her than anyone else possibly could have. On October 3 I got her an absentee ballot request and hand-delivered it to the Auditor’s office. It appeared she would not make it through the week-end, but she did; alas, Monday was a federal holiday and the ballot did not arrive. Monday night, they felt sure she was passing, but again she rallied. The ballot arrived on Tuesday and she cast it. A few hours later, after being assured again that her work here was done, that the map was looking very good for Barack, that Barack was going to win this thing, that her family was going to be OK because of the amazing job she had done raising them, that it was time for her to go and oversee the vote count in Ohio, Beth was finally ready to let go and died that afternoon. This also happened to be the 34th anniversary of the day she and her beloved husband had met.

It was a gift and a privilege to be with her over the last months. She was one strong and determined woman, and in the end she left on her own terms. Beth was deeply committed to the Obama effort; now we will see it through for her and for the country. Community organizing will become increasingly important no matter what happens in this election. Beth’s spirit will be with us.

— *Cathy Bolkcom is the co-founder of Progressive Action for the Common Good in the Quad Cities*

Complexities of Campus

If one were to look at the survey data about the complexities of campus life, the profile of the typical student would be too much. One-in-four women on campus risks sexual assault. As many have an STD and may not know it. Half of the student population on any campus experiences depression in some form during the school year. Between half and three-quarters of college students binge drink. Two-thirds volunteer that they have cheated on an exam or assignment. Men are increasingly underrepresented among campus populations, as their academic achievements lag more each year. Arrests and violence among men are increasing. The list goes on, all of it found in a regular flow of headlines that add up to campus life as an unnavigable mess. When I read another bad news story, I am often left with the sensation of a series of storm clouds moving in across the skyline, all but unnoticed but lethal all the same.

As a professor on the University of Iowa campus, I must confess that these news reports cause me more than a little dissonance. After all, I am trained as a social scientist to respect survey methodology as a way to understand things that I cannot observe directly. But when my students visit my office hours, I cannot make the connection. Mostly women—as a language arts-related field, journalism is female-dominated, unlike math and the sciences—these bright young people are

on task, working hard. Our discussions about assignments, their job searches, and almost anything they bring up only reflect the kinds of students one might hope for.

So where does this problem come from? I think it much of the problem owes to binge drinking. On two occasions, I have taught public relations campaigns courses devoted to developing plans to address binge drinking on campus. We have studied the Harvard School of Public School's binge drinking report. Harvard has been studying Iowa students since the 1990s, after having selected the campus as one of seven heaviest drinking schools in the country. Their most recent study, which is available on the Web, considered drinking habits at more than 100 schools.

During a break in class one day, I asked the students—again, 17 of 18 were female—why their classmates across campus were so devoted to excessive drinking. One of them, a particularly clear-eyed young woman from the Chicago suburbs, replied, "It's the college experience. It's what we came to Iowa for."

If I said that my personal stock did not fall in that moment, I would be lying. Ten years of higher education, three degrees, four moves across the country, and a tenure track to meet, well..., the beer truck. But I worked through that moment.

She added, "I'm not binge drinking."

We just go to the bars, because that's where things happen."

I tried to make the case that she was, in effect, an accessory to binge drinking, if she provided the crowd for the guy who was going to have 19 beers. But the moment passed.

Still, I have continued to ask what can be done. Recently, I found a solution. Perhaps I should say, "another solution." The Provost's Office and the Office of Residential Life are running a set of programs intended to persuade students that scholarship and a healthy campus life can be attractive. But they are effectively outnumbered every day by the morning beer trucks on Dubuque. There's certainly room for more action in concert with their programs.

So, here's a new idea: Dr. Sam Cochran, director of the UI Counseling Center, has organized a group of men from the faculty and staff who are willing to do what we can. Not everything, but on a daily basis what we can. I say, "we," because I've stepped forward, too. We don't have a name, yet. But our first lunchtime meeting last month showed a common sense of purpose among a group from a range of departments from athletic and academic departments. More importantly, we agreed that we are unfazed by the magnitude of the corporate-sponsorship of drinking on campus. We take it as a crisis and a challenge. More than that, we are determined to address the problems I listed at the start of this essay.

So, what if one student avoided the pitfalls described in the national press as typical of the majority? I believe we would count that as a victory.

As Cochran's group continues to meet during this academic year, we will offer our experiences, both formal and informal, to students as role models of what else they can think, know, and do on this campus.

The men's group will meet for lunch again on November 18 at noon in the River Room I of the newly re-opened IMU. Join us, if you can. We have work to do.

— Frank Durham is a role model. He can be reached for more info at frankdurham@uiowa.edu

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You Never Know

I was born in Oxford. My father was a blacksmith.

I have neuropathy. It's like a real bad case of arthritis. I try to get by with a cane, but it's not easy. Tomorrow we're going to Wal-Mart to talk to an insurance man about the new Medicare drug plans. I hope we'll get some answers.

Two of our sons were wounded in Vietnam. One had his femur shot off, the other was shot in the shoulder. If my boys were of draft age today, we'd leave and move to Canada. We've got the worst president. We're so far in debt now I don't know how we're ever going to get back to normal.

We've lived here for sixty-one years. We paid \$1,650 for our home back in 1944. It's the only house we've ever lived in.

Once a month we go to Tama to play bingo and the slots. We don't take much money.

I have my daily devotions. As long as you believe in God and go to church, that's all that's necessary.

Baking is good for me. I like to make kolaches.

— Violet Reihman

I just graduated from the University with a degree in psychology. Right now I'm working in a junior high school with kids who have mental disabilities. Eventually I'd like to get a Ph.D. and be some sort of therapist.

When I turned eighteen, I had a small armband with a heart tattooed on my arm, but as I got older, it wasn't me, so I changed it to a Pacific Northwest Indian design. I have a Celtic tattoo on the back of my neck. I know a guy who does tattoos, so I traded one of my paintings for the tattoo on my arm.

I do mostly acrylics on canvas. I paint a lot of trees, plants, and leaves.

I like to be outside, and I love going to concerts. I just went to Lollapalooza in Chicago. My parents didn't run a very tight ship, so I went to a lot of concerts around the country when I was growing up.

I have an Obama sticker on my Volkswagen right now. He's really charismatic. It's not that I'm anti-Hillary. I like the idea of Bill back in the White House. I just think Obama would bring some change.

I want to travel to Eastern Europe, South America, Central America,

Mexico, Asia, and more places in the U.S. I've been to Europe a couple of times.

I can't see myself ending up in Oxford, but you never know.

— Kristi Somerville

Excerpts from The Oxford Project, a collection of photographs and interviews of the residents of Oxford, Iowa, by Peter Feldstein and Stephen Bloom. Available at Prairie Lights Books or www.theoxfordproject.com

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE

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"Hope is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul."

— Emily Dickinson