

Lights under bushels

Amazing things are happening in quiet ways

As I have reported before, one of the great joys of the news business are the stories you come across when you are out wandering around with nothing much on your mind. No, that is not exactly correct. You have an idea you may find something if you are up and about, you just do not know exactly what.

This is how it was for me in recent days on three very different occasions. The first and most recent was getting an award Monday night from the Catholic Youth Association and being introduced to a philanthropic activity of the Rooney family that I knew nothing about. Gov. Ed Rendell was the star attraction, winner of the Art Rooney Award that now is in its 30th year, but what surprised me was the size of the affair and the intensity of the organizers' engagement.

The prize I received was established six years ago to honor the memory of Bill Burns, the KDKA newsman, and people who work in journalism. I could not resist noting that it was nice to see a Craig among all those Irish names, but more to my point here was the discovery that hundreds of Pittsburghers were quietly doing deeds in a good cause that until that night I had no knowledge of. Oh, sure, I knew of the CYA, it is everywhere, but like so much else, out of sight, out of mind.

I had the same "Well, what do you know!" reaction when I moderated a debate the week before for Democratic primary council candidates in the 7th and 9th districts. First there was the neighborhood and the sponsor, the Friendship Preservation Group. It is a lively place, Friendship; not without problems, but a part of town where things are happening. Yet, until you go there, what I say means nothing.

Then there is Friendship Elementary School, the event site. I have been inside many Pittsburgh schools but never Friendship, which I explored before the debate. It is a gorgeous structure, exquisitely maintained. The grand center hall with its mosaic floor and heavy, neoclassic walnut wood work is its distinguishing feature, but from the gym where the debate was held, to the classrooms that I could see, to the grounds, the place was a match for any elementary school, public or private, I've visited.

The picture is far from perfect; there are buildings that are depressing and not well maintained. But in my experience that is not the norm in Pittsburgh, which prompts me to note that most of the people running off at the mouth about urban schools in letters or on the air have never set foot in one; they talk about what they feel, not what they know.

I am not being an apologist. I also comment only on physical surroundings and their maintenance. But they count for much and are a marker for other things.

Then there was the event itself. The audience — 80 to 100 — was a pleasant surprise: I have been to many of these affairs

where no one but the candidates and their families show up. The audience and the candidates also had command of the issues, something that is also not usually the case.

Mitch Kates and Nancy Noszka in the 7th and Twanda Carlisle and Judith Ginyard in the 9th covered taxes, absentee landlords, taxes, TIFs, taxes and other ground and kept the hoary bromides to an absolute minimum. Two of the people who came up afterward to congratulate the candidates said they'd recently moved into the district from out of town and could not have been more impressed. Imagine that! Moved to the area, chose to live in the city and loved it!

My third stop was the The Fund for Advancement of Minorities Through Education (FAME) luncheon April 23 at the Duquesne Club, in many ways the antithesis of the CYA and Friendship affairs. This scene was establishment muscle and but-toned-down.

In some quarters, secondary schools with white upper-middle-class Protestant roots prompt strong feelings that do not similarly accrue to Roman Catholic and other private schools. Snobby, elitist, not part of the American mainstream are adjectives that characterize what in its crude form is only another prejudice.

However, as with the other topics in this column, the more you know about The Ellis School, Sewickley Academy, Shady Side Academy, St. Edmund's Academy and Winchester Thurston, the more vulnerable your preconceived notions.

For 10 years FAME has been raising private funds to pay to send African-American kids to one of these schools. This year the cost was \$5,000 per child per year for the 44 youngsters currently in the program; that is \$1 million plus, a number more than matched by the schools so that each youngster gets full freight.

Maurio Medley, a Shady Side Academy graduate and Kent State senior, was the first FAME scholar in 1992. He had a packed room in his thrall as he recounted what his education had done for him and what he intended to do for Pittsburgh this fall when he comes back home to be a teacher.

Mary Grant, who came from Philadelphia to head Ellis last year, said she had never seen a minority education program there or anywhere else with the power of FAME. She said diversity at all five schools went far beyond the nine scholarships FAME provided each. She said she suspected the schools were as diverse as any educational institutions in the region. Ronald E. Gebhardt, a retired executive from Sewickley, whom you don't know from a hole in the ground but is more responsible than any other individual for this success, was seen smiling broadly.

John G. Craig Jr. is the former editor of the Post-Gazette (jcraig@post-gazette.com).

PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE SUNDAY MARCH 1, 2003