

SOAPBOX PHILOSOPHY • WEST BRANCH TIMES EDITOR GREGORY R. NORFLEET

Putting 'special' in special ed at Hoover Elem.

The story of Brance and Katie Rivera deserves a second look: These are parents who take raising their children seriously and enthusiastically.

The *West Branch Times* featured the Rivera family in mid-May for their extraordinary efforts to find a school that would not only give their youngest son, Cal, a place to learn, but to thrive.

Cal, age 3, the youngest of three children, was born with Down syndrome. The Riveras searched the area to find a school that not only would accept him, but would include him in a traditional classroom setting.

Hoover Elementary stepped up, which says something for West Branch Community Schools. The Riveras did not only look at public schools, but private, too.

"We toured quite a few schools in our area," Katie said, "and most refused to accept or allow Cal to attend."

It is important to clarify that public schools that receive federal funding are required by law to accept special education pupils. It is not required that those schools put them in streamlined classrooms.

The federal government's Education For All Handicapped Children Act tries to cover 40 percent of what a school needs to spend on special education pupils. However, it does not always meet that goal, because needs differ from pupil to pupil. That said, it is easier for schools to put special ed pupils together as much as possible. It's more expensive and more work to assign aides to every child.

But when a family like the Riveras comes along



Hoover Elementary preschooler Cal Rivera poses March 21 with preschool teacher Joan Gredell (seated, left) and several other school staff members on World Down Syndrome Day. The Rivera family, who lives in eastern Iowa City, chose to send Cal to the West Branch school after the school showed a willingness to put the 3-year-old with his peers, rather than a separate classroom. Photo provided by Hoover Elementary/Joan Gredell

and works with the school, that's different. Parents who put in the extra effort to collaborate with school staff, especially sharing insights into their particular child's disability and best practices, make streamlining easier.

"We toured Hoover Elementary twice and we were really impressed with how children of different abilities were included in the classroom. They were not pulled out or segregated," Katie said.

To parents of special education pupils, this observation is big. Good parents want their sons and daughters integrated into a normal learning environment because "normal" is not the default for their children. Normal is

not just an aspiration, but a necessity, because one day those parents will no longer be around. To some degree, those children may need to take care of themselves.

Principal Dave Hlas noted that, at least in Cal's case, the school did not need to purchase any new equipment for his education or involvement. Of course, this is not always true.

What Hoover Elementary did for the Riveras was turning up the communication dial — emails, phone calls, and journaling.

"We did a lot of advocating and educating. When we brought up concerns and education models that would help him thrive,

every time we were met with, 'Yeah, let's try that.' I really adored that," Katie said.

That involves more time, but the family appreciates it and it makes things easier in the long run for both the family and the school.

"(Mrs. Rivera) is big on communication and follow-through, and we do that well," Hlas said. "We try to make a great connection with any family that comes in our doors."

Yet something else needs to be mentioned here.

Any good parent knows children are a lot of work, but the rewards far exceed the effort. In fact, the pro-abortion Turnaway Project found that just one week

after being denied an abortion, 35 percent of women changed their mind. After giving birth, that figure rose to 88 percent. And five years later, 96 percent changed their mind.

That's quite a turnaround for someone who did not want a child at all.

A former labor and delivery nurse, Katie said parents who learn that their child may have Down Syndrome and then consider abortion should know that her experience is not unique.

"I would tell people that the journey is going to be so much better than anything they can imagine," she said. "You will see the world through a new lens more beautiful than I thought it could be."



Gregory R. Norfleet

This brings us back to Hoover Elementary. By agreeing to make the extra effort for Cal, the school staff sent a signal that they see Cal

as more than a pupil — and certainly more than federal and state funding — but as a human being with intrinsic value.

Cal has value — not just because people give him value or because he has potential — but because, like all of us, it is part of his very nature. This is a value that comes simply because he exists. As his parents note, Cal is one of God's creations.

"I want to convey that we are incredibly thankful and overjoyed how West Branch is so welcoming and receiving of Cal," the mother said. "They are making the world a better place for him."

When I interviewed Katie, her Christian faith came up. The conversation zoomed in on Psalm 139:13-14, which, in part, states that God "knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made ..."

When parents have this perspective and belief about their own children, it is not hard to see how the Riveras take raising their children seriously and enthusiastically.

That's really, "special" ed.

Gregory R. Norfleet is the editor of the West Branch Times. You may reach him at gregory.norfleet@westbranch-times.com or 319-643-2131.

CEDAR VALLEY VOICES

Iowa: Where we make abortion hard to get

By Nikole Tutton
Cedar Valley Voices

Last week we asked who was benefiting from the passing of this "heartbeat bill."

To date, not many people are celebrating this violation of democracy in action except for an organization receiving the governor upon her "victory" in last Friday's Family Leadership Summit.

It is a very small, tax-exempt, organization called the Family Leader, based in Urbandale, Iowa, and led by Bob Vander Plaats.

You might remember him as the failed Republican candidate for

governor in 2002, 2006, and 2010. In his role as CEO of this 2-person non-profit organization, his income was listed as \$197,375 in 2021 and he earned another \$25,675 from activities related to the organization. (PLC, 2022) He is not a pastor — he is a high school teacher and failed politician.

He is a self-promoting Christian who wants to align his values with the Iowa Legislature and beyond. According to the group's IRS 990 in 2021, its purpose is to "DEVELOP, ADVOCATE, AND SUPPORT LEGISLATIVE AGENDA AT THE STATE AGENDA."

But if you go to the web-

site, it reads like an evangelical megachurch. It even states that it is non-partisan, however, the intelligent reader has the strange feeling it was put there to maintain tax-exempt status and not for veritas.

For a Christian organization that is working toward saving unwanted children, it was missing two key elements:

#1) helping those unwanted children and mothers who are forced to carry them with donations and programs to help their situation.

#2) any scripture from the Bible supporting his view on abortion.

The Family Leader is a lobbying organization who

has no business in politics — Iowans have made it very clear on that point, Bob.

The group's agenda is disguised as Christian, but in reality, is a self-aggrandizing way to line their pockets with a great deal of tax-free cash.

What do they do? Promote their values over the voters. It says so clearly in their tax documentation and on their website — and that is all that they do.

Why Gov. Reynolds is so enamored with this group is because the nation looks to them the same way they look to a Joel Osteen or Pat Robertson, and she should be looking to the people of Iowa instead.

This is not democracy;

it is by definition an autocracy and Bob Vander Plaats is a "king maker."

Our government is not run by the people, it is run by lobbying organizations like this with their own special interests and backed by money that is not publicly available for scrutiny.

This has been proven time and time again and both the Democrats and the Republicans who want to work on real issues like infrastructure and clean water are powerless to stop it.

Where is the Family Leader getting over \$300,000 per year? (*PLC, 2022) Why is this failed politician calling the shots in Iowa?

I want clean water, new bridges, and unity between the parties. I don't want Vander Plaats putting my rights, or anyone else's back in the red tent.

Bring back democracy to Iowa and take out this sham of an organization, once and for all.

*PLC, T. &. (2022, September 30). ProPublica.org. Retrieved July 16, 2023, from Form 990: <https://projects.propublica.org/non-profits/organizations/421469051-202321109349300842/full>

Nikole Tutton lives in Mechanicsville. The Cedar Valley Voices seeks to promote Democratic and progressive ideas of the residents who live in the Cedar County area.

SOUNDBOARD

We must save public schools from GOP

Can public schools be saved?

This unthinkable question has become highly thinkable following the 2023 Iowa legislative session.

Some of us could see the handwriting on the wall years ago when public education lost its universal

support.

Since 2010, when public education funding took a big financial hit due to the Great Recession at the end of the G.W. Bush administration, Republican governors Branstad and Reynolds have severely underfunded public schools.

Twelve years of underfunding along with continual criticism of public education, public school teachers and administrators while promoting the cul-

ture war on public schools has brought us to this point.

Educational Savings Accounts, more accurately 'vouchers,' which transfer our tax money to people who have abandoned public schools long ago, may well be the final nail in the coffin.

Teachers need our support, not intimidation and threats of discipline for failing to meet the extreme right-wing evangelical cultural warriors' expectations. The teaching profes-

sion is challenging enough without having to constantly look over their shoulder for the next attack or tread lightly on the eggshells placed under their feet by an extremist minority.

Administrators and school boards increasingly need to focus on complying with narrow-minded bans on books, curriculum, and the GOP war on the diversity of public-school students all the while searching for ways to maintain operation with fewer

funds, exacerbated by declining enrollment, and leading to reduced opportunities for students who are the real victims of this culture war.

Public schools have always been the bastion of opportunity for ALL students regardless of income, ethnicity, and abilities.

As our tax money and children of upper-income parents flow to private schools, public schools will continue to struggle.

Add declining student

enrollment and you have a recipe for failure, for our schools and our children.

Tipton is already considering changes in the next year or two which will have unforeseen negative consequences for education.

If you are not concerned about the failure of quality public education in Tipton and 100's of other small towns in Iowa, you should be.

Larry Hodgden
Tipton

PUT THIS NUMBER IN YOUR CELL PHONE!!!

319-643-2000

Robert's Towing



Mexico Lindo Grill & Cantina

Open Daily

Lunch Specials

711 Downey St.
West Branch
(319)877-8025



kathy knoop

REALTOR®

319-325-3294

Proudly serving the West Branch community since 2013!



COLDWELL BANKER Coldwell Banker Real Estate Professionals 319-351-3355 • www.cbpre.com