

## COMMENTARY

# Natural-born health services

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*"If you can't be good, be careful, and if you can't be careful, stay between the ditches."*

—Burdie Baker, Mayor of Charleston Park

Poor is as poor does, that's Burdie Baker's opinion. And Burdie, at 68 a self-described "Outsider, Black Redneck, the first and last of an endangered species," is the new (and old) Mayor of Charleston Park, informally elected.

Since I don't think that gives him enough to do, I propose assigning all those between the ages of 5 and 15 in Lee County to a Burdie-Bound School, a month of country living out near the Hendry County line, organized by Burdie himself. Something like Outward Bound School, but much more valuable.

Here's why: Lee County is said to have one of the highest suicide rates and drug-addiction rates in the country, and our obesity rate is DOUBLE the national average. Could this be true? It's also true that Burdie grew up on a sharecropper's farm in south Georgia, plowing with a mule and eating only what his family could grow.

The two facts — one complicated and contemporary and one as simple as a hand-dug well — may seem unrelated, but in truth they're the seeds of a perfect marriage: the marriage of knowledge and ignorance, and of wealth and poverty.

Burdie's the one with knowledge and wealth, and obese, unhappy children, our potential addicts, are the ones with ignorance and pov-

erty, no matter how much money their parents have, or how many social programs exist to help them.

So I suggest that Lee County quit complaining about budget cuts and hire Burdie Baker — say at \$150,000 a year — to teach our county's youth how to plough with a mule.

One problem officials would have to face right off the bat is Burdie's feeling about mules. (He happens to like children, at least judging by his reaction to my son, Nash, 5, who has already spent significant time with Burdie and his rabbits, chickens, and special fishing holes hereabouts.)

Yessir, mules will be a real problem for Lee health workers, who probably don't recognized their value in public health services, yet; it's just that Burdie knows them so well. His father used the beasts to grow his own cotton, corn, peanuts, watermelon and potatoes as a sharecropper near Bainbridge, Georgia until Burdie turned 13. When the old man suddenly died, Burdie had to quit school and go to work himself, sometimes behind a mule, to help support his mother and his seven younger brothers and sisters. "I ain't too crazy 'bout mules," he admits.

Sharecropping wasn't really sharecropping, not in 1952 in south Georgia. "It was balance-due farming," Burdie once told me. "You owed everything. And when you went to visit the house of a white man, you had to go to the back door. When he turned 18, you had to start callin' 'im 'Sir.'"

I wonder sometimes if Burdie spent his adult life as an over-the-road truck driver just so he could keep driving away from those mules. Probably not; that's too complicated, and Burdie is complex, but he's not complicated.

To visitors, he'll shout out, "Come on in, put your rump on a stump," and then offer you the best chair in the house.

It's a new one now; His wife, Pansy, whom he married in 2002, wouldn't move out from

Fort Myers on a permanent basis until he got rid of the old one earlier this year. That was a road man's country dream: a low, blue, 1975-model rectangular cube of tin stuffed with 30 or so fishing rods, 20 or so hats, a couple of old shotguns, chairs that had become organic, and the warmest welcomes you'll every see on any compass.

But new place or not, his old habits are the same. He's what used to be called poor, financially speaking — that would be somebody else's term, though, not his. He's never taken a cent of government money or a handout, unless you count Social Security or medical benefits that accrue for the over-the-hill gang.

Years ago, he gave up drinking and smoking — he just flat quit one day, he recalls. He fishes a lot for food with a cane pole, and he's turned his yard into a bountiful vegetable garden year after year. Occasionally friends, local farmers, will call him if they trap a hog, Burdie will ride out, shoot it, butcher it on the spot, and put it in his freezer.

Of course, he'll give half of that away to somebody else who needs it, or even somebody who doesn't, just like he will the vegetables he grows or the gas in his tank when he delivers neighbors to a doctor's office or a Social Security office or a store miles away.

And he just keeps working. In retirement, he's collecting old tin cans or scrap metal, flattening them in his driveway, and selling them as recyclables for 36 cents a pound. It's hard for him to stop, in spite of a doctor's advice to the contrary — he has a new pacemaker, and some other medical problems.

He's defined his position as mayor by doing what he always did: picking up trash all over Charleston Park, fixing people's wells, and resisting the sometimes-difficult status quo. When drug dealers seemed to take over the Park, for example, his sister, Alice Washington, organized big marches, and Burdie started carrying a .38 pistol.



COURTESY PHOTO

**Burdie Baker with Roger Williams' 5-year-old son Nash.**

"I may be old," he told me, "but there's nothing wrong with my trigger finger."

And all these modern kids, obese or not: They may be young, but there's nothing wrong with putting them behind a mule. With the Mayor of Charleston Park. ■



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