

Mike Levine

Reflections on a chosen pond

Dear reader,
Over the past year, some of you have been kind enough to tell me this column has touched your life in some way. I'm glad. Because you've certainly touched mine.

Beginning next week, this column enters its second year. I want to take this time to thank you for that. I've received close to 1,000 notes and letters from readers during the past 12 months. Even more readers have contacted me by phone.

Many of these calls and letters are appeals for help from people in trouble. Sometimes I make suggestions. Sometimes I place a call on behalf of a reader. But often, I am powerless to do anything except listen to tears.

I hate feeling helpless. I want to be of some use. I have a hard time shutting out these situations in my mind after work. I'm told I'd better learn.

You've also made me learn how to handle criticism. I've read a nasty letter to the editor and I say to myself, "Yeah, that Levine is a real wacko." I've developed a pretty tough hide. I say I have, anyway.

Being in the limelight was new to me. It's taken some getting used to. Strangers stop me on the street to talk or ask me to visit their friend in the hospital or come to their house for dinner. The governor personally responded to a column I wrote.

I don't think any of this will go to my head. Before I came a reporter, I worked as a busboy, a stock clerk, a

factory worker and a messenger. When I go to interview big shots in their offices, I don't forget I used to have to use the delivery entrance. It wasn't that long ago.

What I feel is gratitude. A week before the column began, a newspaperman warned me a column like this couldn't be done. He said that Record readers come from too many varied backgrounds and communities to cotton to a local opinion columnist.

But I figured we were all a little tired of being marketed like soap and separated into 89 different groups. Folks is folks.

So this became a general store of a column — a place where we can sit around and chew the fat 'bout this and that. I want it to be a place where we can have a laugh, share a grief, help a neighbor, and cut a bully down to size. I always picture someone talking back to me, arguing or adding something. My aim is to start conversations, not end them. Like anyone else, I'm probably wrong as often as I'm right.

If I've been unfair to people in some situations, I apologize. It hasn't been on purpose. Things need a good shaking up around here, but they don't need a cheap-shot artist.

I'm proud that this column won a first place award this year from the state-Associated Press. But this started a new round of pressure from my friends in New York City who say I should now move on to a bigger pond.

I don't think they understand. This is the pond I care

opinion

about. This is my home.

I was brought up to believe talent is God-given. It's not something you sell to the highest or biggest bidder. You put your talents where you think you can be of service.

And believe me, I've gotten back far more than I've given here. I'm a lucky man.

I hope I haven't bored you with all this personal stuff. I just think you have a right to know who you're dealing with here.

And more than anything else, I want to thank you for your readership. I hope the pleasure isn't all mine.

I know that over the past year, we've been able to prevent the state from robbing a lovely retarded girl of her dignity. We've made progress in the defense of children against abusers. We've helped make this area a force to be reckoned with in Albany.

I think we've done some good in this world.

I say "we" because the heroes are the people who have the guts to fight. The heroes are the readers who join that fight for dignity. That's who should receive the awards.

I'm still only a messenger. It's just that they're letting me use the front door these days.

Thank you for trusting me with your messages.

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