

## Our City

I am humbled by gratitude. My experiences over the past year have been beyond once-in-a-lifetime. Over the years of writing this column I have written of those who have helped guide teach and mold me into becoming who I am today, certainly they must all be thanked again. But, it was Randy Jensen, who saw in me after he became our school district's superintendent the potential that I had long given up on developing further in education. It was his nomination and encouragement to apply for the Idaho Teacher of the Year (TOY) that changed much of my life this past year. The nomination itself changed me. The actual recognition transformed and propelled me into becoming something I only vaguely dreamed of; a voice that was invited and appreciated by many throughout Idaho and education. To Governor Brad Little, Sherri Ybarra, Superintendent of Public Instruction; Greg Wilson, Senior Policy Adviser on Education; Debbie Critchfield, President of the Idaho Board of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officials (CCSSO), the Idaho Legislature, and our State Senators and Representatives I extend my thanks to you as well for inviting my voice, experiences and suggestions to the State and National discussion on education and how to best meet the needs of our youth and their future. It has been an honor.

The culmination of the honor to date happened about 10 days ago in New Orleans, Louisiana. The 57 TOYs and one guest each were invited and hosted, all expenses paid, by the College Football Playoff Foundation, the Extra Yard for Teachers Foundation and the CCSSO to attend the National Football Championship game between LSU and Clemson. Once-in-a-lifetime; hardly describes the five day experience. No expense was spared, whatever exists above first-class, royalty perhaps, was how all of us were treated for the duration of our five day experience. Sally is not a football or big crowd fan so she gave her spot as my plus-one to Randy Jensen.

Beyond the experience of the royal treatment and game I believe Randy very much came to appreciate the other TOYs and their plus-ones. I am sure he saw in many of them teachers he has known in his 30 plus years in education and still works with today as I do. I say that because surprisingly TOYs typically don't come from privileged schools; they come from schools with students much like mine, most with everything in their lives but privilege. They work hard every day and many nights to make a better path for those souls in their classrooms. Without exception it is their love for children and the possibility of making the improbable possible that drives each of them every day in their classrooms and beyond those four walls. They have been an honor for me to know, collaborate with, admire and love; several becoming life-long friends.

There is something about the company you are able to keep that sets the tone for an experience. From Randy Jensen to my TOY cohort the company could not have been better; they like our hosts were beyond first-class. They are exceptional people to their core.

As I speak of exceptional, it only begins to describe the food we experienced through the evening events. The three main meal functions we attended likely cost near \$1,000 per person in total; not that money is a measure of quality of anything but our sponsors spared no expense. I have only had food experiences like this twice before in my life, once at Gary Danko's in San Francisco and once at Deckman's in Guadalupe, Baja, Mexico. The single

descriptive word that comes to mind is exquisite. I have few memories of food; but this will be one.

Monday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 was game day. The day itself was surreal. Randy and I enjoyed an early morning walk each day through various parts of the historic city; that Monday was no different. At around noon that day the entire group walked to Game-Day central and the spot of the Teacher Toss that was produced and filmed by ESPN. The Teacher Toss allowed each teacher a single attempt to throw a football through a 16 inch hole from about 15 yards. Each successful attempt earned money towards the Extra Yard for Teachers Foundation that was donated by the Eckrich Company. As fortune would have it Shelley Parks the TOY from Missouri, Jeff Wheatcraft of Texas and I were the only successful attempts earning \$25,000 for the Foundation. Shelley stole everyone's hearts as she completed the throw with her ten month old son Juda strapped in a pack to her chest; it was freaking awesome, and the crowd went nuts! Kirk Herbstreit, of ESPN, could have earned the Foundation a million dollars with a successful attempt from about 25 yards but settled for \$100,000 as he missed the two attempts given him.

The game turned out to be one that stories could be written about. The Heisman Trophy winner, plays for a National Championship, in his school's home state, facing a team that had won 28 straight games and the last National Championship. Our game tickets were scalping for between \$2,500 and \$3,000 prior to the game. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be sure. While I had no tiger in the fight it was cool to see LSU win in a hard fought battle. The crowd went berserk and Bourbon Street outside our hotel was a massive party until almost daylight.

To the College Football Playoff Foundation, the Extra Yard for Teachers Foundation and the CCSSO I say thank you again; it could not have been a better experience. To my TOY cohort and Randy Jensen I say thank you too for changing my life. I don't know what the next few years will bring but I look forward to making a positive difference in the lives of those I work with every day; whether they know it or not they too change my life day-in and day-out.

Until next week...