

Opinion

## **Letter to the Editor: Media man was model citizen, neighbor, friend**

Thursday, September 13, 2012

### **Tribute to a Media Man**

Recently, I had the sad privilege of attending the funeral of a wonderful and well-known Media man – Mr. Ronald E. Pierce. The large congregation of family, friends, and neighbors that filled the pews of the First United Methodist Church at State and Lemon Streets was a tribute in itself, before the flow of fond memories, prayers, praise, and hymns had even begun.

“Ronnie” as he was affectionately known, had never been elected to high office, nor was he a TV star, nor was he among our community’s richest or most powerful leaders. But he cast a long shadow, nonetheless, and he was wealthy in the ways that matter most. He was by all accounts a loyal husband, a good father, grandfather, friend, and co-worker. He walked his children to school, combed their hair, and supported the church.

Pierce was a dedicated public servant who was employed by the Borough of Media for 42 years. For 72 years, his devotion to family, friends, and the town he loved helped to make our little corner of the world a better place. As a mutual friend aptly described Ronnie:

“There was no better human being.”

Though I must have known him for nearly fifty years, I was not a close personal friend of Ronnie’s, but I liked and admired him all my life. And for years, I wasn’t sure what his name actually was, because I grew up in Media at a time when one’s first name was not the most accurate way of identifying someone. Much like the Eastern tradition of naming people, most locals were known first by the family to which they belonged. And there were reasons for this.

In those days, you could usually tell which family a person belonged to merely by looking at someone’s face. You didn’t need to know what his first name was – you could easily tell if one was a Moat, or a Trusty, a Bean, a Baughn, a Benson, a Simpson or a Somerville, a

Randolph, a Durnell, an Ortiga, or a Pierce – just by looking at one. Even children had the ability to recognize family of origin through physical traits. Sometimes using first names alone was not definitive. If one merely referred to “Ronnie,” the listener might ask: “*Which* Ronnie? Ronnie Baughn, Ronnie Council, or Ronnie Pierce?” Or one’s first name might actually be a middle name. Or you might be asked as to *which* branch of a person’s family you were referring. Was it the Media Trustys or the Chester Trustys? Or, the Moats on Olive Street, or in East Media? Because of strong family resemblances, even full names were not always foolproof.

There were often times when I would be walking down the street and a stranger might ask: “You’re one of those Lemon boys, aren’t you?” Or, “Aren’t you one of those Ortigas?” “Ortiga” was my grandmother’s married surname but her maiden name was “Ridley.” And many other local families were similarly interrelated. This custom was evidence of a strong sense of community and fraternity among long-time Media residents who knew the basic genealogy of local families. In Media, there was a near certainty that someone who was a stranger to you might know your siblings, parents, or grandparents. While this regional knowledge of family and community connections could often provide a measure of small town safety, it also occasionally had undesirable consequences – because as a kid, this meant it was nearly impossible to get away with anything. Because you never knew who was watching you.

If you were up on State Street cursing like a sailor or acting the fool – which you were forbidden to do – by the time you got home, someone had already called your mother or grandmother to report your bad behavior. The proverb – *it takes a village to raise a child* was true at that time – and woe be unto you if you were disrespectful to any adult in the community. Because, in those days, any responsible adult had the right to scold you for misbehaving. And all grown-ups had to be addressed by youngsters as “Mister” or “Miss.”

So, if you had sassed Miss Francis or Mr. Pendleton, by the time you got home your parents or grandparents would be doubly mad. My grandmother Maud owned a bullwhip. And though she never actually hit any of her grandchildren with it, she was as good at cracking that whip as any cowboy; and could easily scare you back to your senses with a snap of that whip just inches away from you. But despite accounting for yourself when you got home, these family and community bonds made Media a remarkable place to live.

Life in our town was not always idyllic or inclusive, especially for families of color who had lived here for generations. Many of us “baby boomers” grew up in an era when segregation was no longer the law, but it was still practiced around here – when Media didn’t always live up to its slogan: “everybody’s hometown.”

Generally speaking, children and teenagers got along with each other regardless of race, largely because of school and sports. But in those days, children of color were not permitted to swim at Broomall’s Lake. Instead, we swam in Ridley Creek or at the pools owned by the Quaker Linvill or Saul families. Two decades earlier, a maternal uncle of mine from Philadelphia was arrested in the Media Theater because he had refused to sit in the “colored section,” which was not required in the city. When two white women witnessed two African American women with a baby being denied service at a restaurant on State Street, they didn’t simply return home to grumble about it in private. Instead, Marie Whitaker and Quaker Jane James helped to found the Media Fellowship House to champion race relations and challenge racial discrimination.

It was precisely that kind of concern for our neighbors and commitment to community that has kept some of the older families in Media for generations, while enticing new ones to settle here. Death or taxes were typically the primary reasons why some families were forced to leave town. Media has always been a town of special people, and Ronnie Pierce was a shining example of one. I always enjoyed bumping into him on the street, or down at the news stand. He had a million dollar smile; and when he spoke to you, he was never less than genuine. His kind and friendly eyes saw you as a fellow human being who had value in our town, and on our planet.

And whenever periods of time would pass when I didn’t see him, I’d ask around about him. Because I cared about him and he was important to me in my life. He was a constant, quiet, and positive presence; a model citizen, neighbor, and friend. And I will really miss him. My only regret is that I didn’t get a chance to see him more. But I can’t think of a better ambassador than Ronnie Pierce to send up to Heaven to represent the people of Media because, he truly had grace.

By Dr. Sam Lemon, Sept. 10, 2012