

RESTON LAWMAKERS IN BOFFO HIT

By William Nicoson

Last Monday the formidable stand-up duo, Jan & Ken, did their last turn of the season. State Senator Janet Howell and Delegate Ken Plum, that is, closed their Lake Anne performance series sponsored by Learning in Retirement (LRI) in its outreach to Reston from George Mason University. About 50 Restonians, retired and unretired, enrolled for four rock-em, sock-em sessions, featuring Plum's famously fulsome impersonations of downstate or standpat legislators debating straight-lady Howell. President Alan Merten of George Mason showed up at one of the sessions to congratulate the hit performers.

Most of the final session was devoted to frustrating legislative issues facing the Virginia General Assembly, recurring year after year without resolution. Draconian provisions of Virginia's criminal law include the infamous 21-day rule which prohibits courts from reopening proceedings based on new evidence discovered more than 21 days after conviction. As new forensic tools, such as DNA analysis, are being developed, this ancient closure relic is clearly preposterous and in death-penalty cases barbaric, but in this year's legislative session a bill extending the cut-off to 3 years was whittled down by amendment to 45 days before being defeated altogether. Assuming the combative stance of a standpat lawmaker, satirist Plum sang the praises of bringing quick finality to the judicial process, noting that the Governor is free to give weight to new evidence in considering a pardon or commutation.

Another relic of ancient criminal law is the statute outlawing oral sex (between married as well as unmarried partners and regardless of mixed or single gender) as a felony offense. Most states, and the District of Columbia, have long since eliminated authority for state intrusion into private, consensual acts of affection, but not Virginia. For the last nine years a bill has been introduced in the House of Delegates to decriminalize sodomy, but to no avail. This year a bill merely reducing sodomy from a felony to a misdemeanor was passed by the House on a vote of 50-49, but never made it out of the Senate Courts Committee. Satirist Plum spoke movingly of keeping secular law consistent with biblical standards.

An amendment to the state constitution establishing parental rights has been considered by the General Assembly in recent years but defeated, usually by a single vote. When is discipline abuse? asks Senator Howell, who has championed legislation benefitting children. She fears such an amendment will permit parents to assume diverse educational prerogatives throwing schools into disarray and undercutting child protective services. Already the mandate for guidance counselors in schools has been eliminated though many remain at the discretion of supervisors.

A previous session was devoted exclusively to the educational process, elucidating sometimes arcane concepts, such as Standards of Quality, Standards of Accreditation and Standards of Learning, and the constitutional dilemma of maintaining comparable quality state-wide in the

face of widely varying local tax bases. Other legislative subjects (gun control and transportation) permitted satirist Plum to create vivid images of fellow legislators in high rhetorical flights of fantasy. Much time was also given to the geographic, cultural and historic resources of Virginia, for which I was particularly grateful, not knowing where else I could have acquired such precise and valuable information.

Will LRI bring back this thespian twosome for a reprise in future academic terms? Without doubt. My advice is to sign up now for an LRI year at \$220 and create your own curriculum. That way you won't miss the star attractions, of which the Jan & Ken show is only one.

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