

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

December 3, 2007

On disciplining children

I just could not bring myself to give this column the title used so often in covering Beacon Hill's issue of the week – spanking. Entertainment for news-watchers throughout the nation came from our legislative hearing on “An Act prohibiting corporal punishment of children.”

Here's a first-hand report on that hearing.

As a member of the legislature's Elections Committee, I attended the hearing last Wednesday, along with many reporters and their accompanying television cameras. Before writing about the hearing itself, here is some background on the bill.

Our Massachusetts law allows any citizen to file a bill in the legislature. Traditionally, such bills are filed by the person's state representative with the notation that the filing is “by request.” Rep. Jay Kaufman filed last week's bill at the request of one of his constituents.

Every bill is granted a hearing, and Rep. Kaufman's bill was posted on the agenda for last week's meeting. The State House News Service mentioned the unusual bill and noted its hearing. Other media outlets picked up on the story, and soon it made it to local, statewide and national newscasts.

The actual hearing did not live up to the hype. The bill came late on the agenda, so the hearing was hours old before the infamous issue arose. Cameras and most of the media personnel left before the Kathleen Wolf, the citizen sponsor, spoke. She seemed a little overwhelmed by the national attention to her bill, and said she mainly intended to start a conversation about spanking. Other supporting proponents spoke more passionately, testifying to their own parents' harsh treatment of them.

Many committee members voiced their support of the concept, though the committee chair cautioned the sponsor that her bill did not have much support in the legislature. I do not remember spanking my own kids, though they might have a different recollection. Nonetheless, I went on record in support of parents' right to discipline their children with spankings.

In reality, Massachusetts has strong laws defining and punishing child abuse. The witnesses' descriptions of the beatings they endured as children are already illegal in our state. I wish Massachusetts could be known nationally for those laws rather than for the utopian proposal to ban all physical punishments. Even so, I would not give up the right of any individual to introduce a bill in the legislature.

Now that the lights are down and the hearing ended, the bill will most likely spend the rest of the session in a “study,” the legislature's method for disposing of unpopular issues.

NOTE: The publicity generated by last week's hearing had the benefit of granting well-deserved publicity to an issue that might otherwise have been ignored. Several elderly men, survivors of a childhood spent at the Fernald School, spoke to the committee. They told compelling stories of abuse, forced labor, and a lack of even basic education. It seems impossible that such conditions existed as recently as the 1950's, but these men and their fellow victims lived through them. They now seek an apology from the state and the removal of the word “moron” from their permanent records. They deserve a real sign of the state's acceptance of responsibility for their abuse.