



SMOKE SIGNALS

Merry Christmas from the Flaget Alumni Association.

THE OLD SCHOOL POLITICS OF LARRY CLARK

by Mike Harper '63

Flaget High School was a school whose purpose was to prepare young men for life. Flaget alumni are doctors, lawyers, educators, and white collar professionals, as well as musicians, coaches, and those in religious life. There is little doubt that the boys who walked the halls and drank the beer in the cellars of old Flaget High have had a profound effect on shaping our city and state, and we have chronicled many of their stories in this newsletter. We have told the stories of entertainers like Micky Clark, entrepreneurs like Chester Mathis, teachers and coaches like Denny Nash and Tom Finnegan, and numerous local heroes who made us proud wearing the blue and white. But we have other heroes, perhaps of a more gritty nature, whose work is maintain our democracy and by extension, our freedom. I'm talking about politicians, of course: It is well known that Flaget has produced a few of those as well.

Larry Clark '64 is the State Representative for the 46th Legislative District which runs from Rangeland Road to Mt. Washington Road, and from the Bardstown Road to Preston Highway. Last November, despite a negative campaign by an opponent heavily funded by special interests, he bucked the Republican tide and won re-election for the 17th time. Over the years, he has risen to a position of leadership within the Democratic Party in the House and speaks with unabashed pride of the service he has provided to the people in his district and for the causes he continues to support. While we may all argue over the role and scope of government, and though many of us can cite examples of politicians who are corrupt, we should remember that there are many public officials who conduct their lives and perform their political duties in an exemplary way.

Until this interview, I had never met Larry, and since I do not live in his district, I was not particularly familiar with his political career. In conducting interviews for *Smoke Signals* articles for many years, I have learned that the best policy is to talk very little and listen a lot. The fact that Larry is a professional politician made that an easy task, but I found a great deal worth listening to. I found his insights on the inner workings of the Kentucky political system fascinating and his passion for public service inspiring. He had no reason to campaign for my vote since he is not my representative, but by the end of the interview I considered that fact regrettable. In the following paragraphs, Larry gives a brief account of his entry into the world of Kentucky politics and of how Flaget has influenced his life and career.

"I went to St. Benedict's grade school and most of the boys there went to Flaget. Of course, Coach Paulie Miller and all of his family went to St. Benedict's, so he was good at recruiting all the young guys to go to Flaget. I lived next door to the Steiger family and Bob Steiger was one of my best friends. He played football for Flaget, so it was a natural fit for me. My mother was widowed twice. My biological father died a month before I was born and my step-father died when I was sixteen. He had worked at Anaconda Aluminum and we lived at Twenty-Third and Greenwood. There were five of us boys that my mom helped raise, so it was a good wholesome household and I had some awful good times in the West End. At Flaget I played freshman football, and we had a great football team. I played my freshman year, but I was just too small for the game. I played freshman and JV basketball, but I got cut my junior year. After that, I didn't

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Larry Clark '64

play sports. Being small makes it tough to compete in football and basketball. "After high school I got involved in the electrical trade. I got a four-year apprenticeship and became a construction electrician. After that, I got deeply involved in the IBEW. I didn't have any family in the IBEW, but my mother knew some people that were in the trade and they helped get me in. I'm still working as a union electrical contractor. I've been at United Electric Company for 22 years and they let me go to Frankfort and keep my job here. I currently work as a sales person for them.

"In 1984 I got elected to the Kentucky House of Representatives, and in 1993 I was elected Speaker Pro Tem. I run for that office every two years and hope to be successful again in 2011. The Speaker and Speaker Pro Tem are constitutional officers, so they are elected by both parties in the House.

"The House is a full time job. When we're in session, I spend 130 working days in Frankfort. When we're not in session, it's probably about 110. Next week I'll be there three days, the following week two, and in the interim I work at United Electric. The Walsh family, who own the company, is very tolerant with me going back and forth, but the House is almost full-time now. With the advent of e-mail and the Internet, you get inundated with phone calls and everything else day in and day out. I'm blessed to have a lawyer and two women who work with me in Frankfort. They take a lot of pressure off me, but it's a 24/7 job if you want to do the job right."

When asked to comment on Kentucky Senate President David Williams and the conflict over casino gaming in Kentucky, Larry responded, "I have to deal with him from time to time when I deal with the Senate leadership. He's always in your face. You can't back down from him and you have to be just as aggressive. If he can run over you, he'll try to do it. It's just a shame that with some of the major issues that would help our Commonwealth, casino gaming would give our Commonwealth \$800

million more each year. He opposes that, yet he's one of the biggest gamblers in Frankfort, so it's all hypocritical. But I hold my own with him. I try to do the best I can and I try to make sure we can meet in the middle and compromise. People want compromise today, they don't want us bickering all the time. You're elected to be the voice of your people and try to get things done. I like to get things done and make things happen.

"I don't have Churchill Downs in my district, but the whole horse racing industry is suffering due to the lack of funding for larger purses. Larger purses create more betting, more money for the State, and more money for the tracks. I've worked with Churchill Downs on a lot of initiatives trying to create more revenue for them, for the horsemen, for the backside workers and all, but it's very difficult to do. The tracks are competing for the other gaming dollars. Bingo is big in Kentucky and so is the Lottery, but until we get slots at the tracks, we won't have a sustainable way to support the horse racing industry. Our nation is going more and more conservative as demonstrated by the recent election. We had seven more Republicans win seats in the Kentucky House and two more Republican Senators, so it's going to be more and more difficult to get them to support gaming or at least to put the initiative on the ballot for people to decide."

When asked about the current situation in politics, both in Kentucky and nationally, Larry is somewhat pessimistic. "It's awful difficult today given the lack of civility. I go to schools and talk about the importance of voting, but until the money is taken out it, it will be very difficult to ask anyone to be a public servant or to get involved in public life. It's a tough job, you have to be thick-skinned and that's what I am. There were negative ads against me this last election: Brown Foreman was involved (against me) because I voted for the alcohol tax, and the teachers were involved because we tried to change health care, which we all know in Kentucky and across the nation is the biggest cost for everyone, but that's part of politics. They have a right to do what they want to do, but I stayed positive and the voters stayed with me. Most of the time I try to put partisanship aside, but on election day I'm a Democrat and proud of it.

"Across the United States this year, 680 state Democratic representatives were beaten. Fourteen state legislatures went from Democrat to Republican. The biggest reason for the conservative wave was the U. S. Supreme Court decision to change the rules on financing campaigns. It allowed tax exempt organizations, called 527 groups, to spend money on elections with no transparency. We

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had over two billion dollars spent across the United States on elections and we'll probably have six to eight billion dollars spent on the Presidential election in two years, and it's destroying democracy in America. We talk about one man, one vote in America, but if you are going to have that kind of money funding all the negative campaigns, it can ruin democracy and turn people off from going to the polls. I think that unless Congress changes the current spending rules, there will be more and more money spent on elections each year."

Larry described his political methodology. "I do what I call retail politics. I knock on doors. In my 2004 election, I knocked on 15,069 doors and in 2010 – I guess I'm getting a little older – I only knocked on 12,700. I do a lot of direct mail, but I don't do radio and TV ads because I have a small district and it's too expensive. I send newsletters to my constituents and I poll the them in order to find out which issues are important to them. You don't win or lose elections on Election Day, you have to work day in and day out and be very responsive to your constituents.

"My district, the 46th, has five Catholic Parishes, St. Athanasius, St. Ignatius, St. Rita, Mother Seaton, and St Bernard. I attend St Athanasius and there are quite a few Flaget grads in the district, so I get a chance to try to convince them to vote for me. There are 18 Representatives and 7 Senators in Jefferson County. We encompass almost one-fifth of the House, which has about 100 members, and one-fifth of the Senate, which has 38.

"In the next Legislative session, we will have to deal with several major issues. First, there's the budget. We're dealing with the revenue now from 2008 and trying to write a budget for 2010, and 2012. In the last session, when we weren't successful in getting a budget and had to have a special session, I gave half my salary from that session to Dare to Care and the other half to the Home of the Innocents because I believed that if we couldn't get our job done right, then we didn't deserve to be paid. "Medicaid is a major problem, and our budget for that has about a half-billion dollar shortfall. Health care is the biggest budget issue we have and we have to address it. I think that the problem is that the opponents of the new health care law have demonized it so much. The pharmaceutical industry and the insurance industry have powerful lobbying groups in Washington and a lot of those providers are the ones who are fighting it the most and funding a lot of the opposition. There are a lot of good features in the bill and, while I think the whole

plan is difficult to understand, there are more benefits than non-benefits. And I think if people would just let it settle a bit rather than trying to make every issue a political issue, it will work out. It's going to take three to four years and, yes there are some issues we will have to work out, but you don't throw the baby out with the bath water.

"We are also trying to create more jobs. Government can't create jobs, but government can assist the private sector by using economic and tax incentives; but, we must maintain accountability with those incentives. In Jefferson County, I've played a major role with the tax incentive programs for Ford Motor Company, General Electric, and UPS, and I have also been involved with the Metro College University program that UPS has developed."

Being an elected official is not a common occupation, so I asked Larry how he got started in politics. "One reason I got involved in politics is that my younger brother, Danny Ross, was an Alderman years ago. He worked in Lieutenant Governor Patton's office and for Attorney General Greg Stumbo. He was deeply involved in politics, as was my mother who was a West End precinct worker. So our whole family has always been involved deeply with the Democrat Party and I believe that public life is all about helping people. It's something I enjoy. I've been in it 26 years and I have a 100 percent voting record. I've never missed a vote on the House floor. I think it's important that you go to work every day. I still enjoy doing the job, I really do."

Larry's own family grew up in a political environment, and through the years it has become involved in Larry's biennial campaigns. "My wife Violet and I have been married forty years. We have a son and a daughter and three grandchildren, and through the elections, they've all become involved. This last election, for example, was a great opportunity for my son and me. We walked every Wednesday night together, and sometimes my grandson joined us. It was a great way to spend some time together.

"We live in Whispering Hills and have been there about thirty years. I enjoy campaigning. It takes a lot of your time and there is a lot of stress, but I enjoy it because you get to visit all your constituents. It gives you a chance to look them in the eye and ask for their vote. You can ask them what's on their minds and if they want to vent, they can vent, but it's part of reconnecting yourself with the

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people who elected you and it gives you an understanding of how they feel about issues. This last election showed us that jobs are the most important issue in America. Transparency and a smaller government is something people want and also health care, although that is a Federal initiative. In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, we have 735,000 people on Medicaid and we are picking up almost 2,400 a month. It's a very large budget, but we have to take care of people who need the most help. I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that somewhere along the line I made a difference in somebody's life." One of the big complaints that Jefferson County residents have expressed about State government is the perception that our county's share of state revenue is much less than what we pay in taxes. Larry addressed this issue. "Each state is going to have a few communities that generate the most taxes. We have to fight for our fair share, but what I tell people in Frankfort is that we are a good investment. For every dollar you give us, we will send you three back. But until we grow these economies across the state, they will always be a drain on our economy. We are at the center of generating most of the jobs and most of the revenue. But with these hard economic times, everyone is competing for the same dollars. I helped pass the initiative on merger which gives us one voice in Frankfort rather than three.

"The new Mayor, Greg Fischer, is the son of George Fischer, who went to Flaget. He is going to have what we call the Merger 2010 to revisit the merger issue. Greg's a Trinity grad, but we won't hold that against him. I think that there is a lot of compassion in their family and I think he will do the right things and move us forward. I think he has come in at an awfully difficult time, but I think he is a consensus builder. He will generate a lot of startup companies. He has his own company and I've talked to the Union at his company and to some of his employees, and they say he's a great listener. He tries to build consensus and he's someone who has an open door policy. I think that is a plus."

When asked how his connections with Flaget have affected his political career, Larry acknowledged that old school ties are helpful in winning elections, even though his ties dried up thirty-seven years ago. "My last campaign was my 17th, which means I'm 17-0 now. A lot of my high school buddies and my labor friends helped in my campaigns. They knocked on doors and put up yard signs and it's still a great relationship and we keep that connection. We golf and go to sporting events, so it's been great to have them involved and it keeps us connected.

"Since I didn't go to college, Flaget was for me the most wonderful period of my life. It wasn't just the sports, but the whole environment. It was all blue collar working-class people like Mike Malarkey who went to Flaget with me. I was best man at his wedding. He's an electrician and we've been best friends for over forty years. I love him like a brother and you build those relationships. Our class meets once every other month and we will meet tonight. There are about 25 of us that still get together and it is just wonderful. I'm playing golf this Thursday with Tim McCall, Mike Malarkey and Larry Hanke. We all went to Flaget.

"The Xaverian Brothers did a great job with us. I know I spent a little time in jug myself, but we really didn't realize at the time just how much they cared for us. We got a good solid education and it built a lot of character and integrity and it has helped me greatly both in my public and my private life. It was a big family and you made contacts.

"We have a lot of very successful Flaget alumni and we are very proud of them. You know we're an endangered species since we're not producing any graduates any more. I love to play golf and, once in a while, we play at Shawnee and I have to drive by the school or the old house. There's just something about it, it's still there and still a part of me and I have to see it. The irony when I was campaigning for this last election was that some of the people asked me where I grew up and would I say Victory Park, 23rd and Greenwood, or I went to Flaget. So many people will say, 'Well, I grew up in the West End, or I went to Flaget, or I went to Shawnee,' and they all had nothing but positive experiences and things to say. Mr. Steiger would put us all in the car and we'd go to Manual Stadium to watch a football game, or St. George's Gym to see a basketball game. We didn't realize what a great time it was. It's a shame that the young people today are in such a different environment and they don't have what we had. We were working class people and we were able to get along and had a school spirit that was second to none. We were all fortunate to attend a place like Flaget High School and that our parents made sacrifices to get us there.

"I remember that we always had good football teams, Coach Miller made it exciting, and we nearly always were competitive. I remember going to those St. Xavier games – they were big weren't they? I don't remember Paul Hornung as a player, but I have lunch with him once in a while and enjoy listening to him talking about the great football players who played with him. A few

years ago, I got \$150,000 from Frankfort to remodel the Portland Museum and Paul has a lot of his memorabilia there. He lived only about two doors from it.”

“When I read the newsletter that you guys write, it’s interesting to see just how successful many of our graduates have become. You read about all that they have done and they still have their feet on the ground. Guys like Chester Mathis. Chester was an electrician by trade and I worked on jobs with him. You wouldn’t know it just by talking to him because he’s so down-to-earth, but he is not only a nice guy but also a very successful person. My son went to St. Xavier and I like to talk to him about Flaget sometimes. I tell him you just can’t put it into words. There was just something there that kept us all connected together. I don’t know if it was the sports enthusiasm or the Brothers, but being in those classrooms, being together, people from all walks of life, it was a wholesome relationship that you just can’t explain.

“My brother Don frequently attends the monthly alumni meetings. I think what is great about the Flaget Alumni Association is that it is a way of giving back. And you don’t look for a big pat on the back, you’re just quietly doing it and trying to help little child out there get an education or help a poor family get something it needs. That’s what I believe in and I’ve applied that principle in my work in Frankfort. I’m deeply involved in the Home of the Innocents funding and the T.A.P. program which helps the teenage pregnant girls from South Park High School. I help get the funding for them which helps them get into the Scholar House at U of L. It provides academic scholarships and housing for their children. And Dare to Care is in my district. A lot of my work in Frankfort involves helping those who don’t have a voice up there.”

When asked what the future holds for Larry Clark, Larry maintains that he’s not done yet. “Well I’ve been doing this for 26 years. I’m 65 and I’ll be 67 at the end of my

next term. A lot depends on the next Governor’s race. Hopefully, we’ll have a Democrat governor because that will be easier for me to work with. I’ll make that decision about a year from now. I feel good, I’m healthy, and I like what I’m doing. I still have a lot of drive, so I hope to be there another year or two, maybe four. But you have to make sure you have time to smell the roses and know your family and friends too. The House has elections every two years, so you are always running, but if you do your job every day you don’t have to keep looking over your shoulder.

“My wife’s retired and I still have my job and the Legislature, but my wife and I intend to do a little traveling and spend more time with the grandchildren. But other than that, it’s just grinding time in Frankfort and working here and feeling blessed that I’m in pretty good health. My son’s here in Louisville by Holy Family Church and my daughter is up in Indiana. She has an old farm up there and loves it. I don’t know if she will ever come back to Louisville. There’s nothing around there, but she just loves it.”

Another political season has come and gone and the attack ads are starting to fade from our memories. Once again, most of us are fed up with and turned off by politics, but deep down we know that, though the process may be messy and unpleasant, the product is essential. We as a nation have fought wars and made great sacrifices so that men and women with opposing views can trash each other in public displays of incivility. But what makes it work and what makes it worth continuing is the fact that those of us who bother to vote really do determine our own destiny. I believe that Larry Clark is one of the good guys in our political system, and that a lot of the good qualities that make him that way can be traced to Flaget. I can’t help but think that the Brothers who taught Larry at Flaget must be proud of their handiwork.

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