

Thursday November 29, 2012
The Buffalo News.com

City & Region

Confronting a sign-maker on harsh turf

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Published: November 29, 2012, 12:04 AM Updated: November 29, 2012, 01:17 AM

I just had to meet him.

How could I not want to meet the guy with the “Voters Reniged” sign in his front yard to protest the re-election of the black president?

Sure, this is the region that backed the gubernatorial candidate who forwarded racist emails about the president and first lady. But that was done privately in “post-racial” America.

This was different. This was public.

So I had to meet him.

Driving up Center Street in the Town of Aurora, I passed the high school and couldn’t help but wonder about the town these kids are growing up in, where such a display is tolerated.

If they ride past this sign every day, what kinds of employers, lenders and real estate agents will they turn out to be?

As I passed American flags and Christmas decorations – and at least two lawn jockeys – it occurred to me that maybe the sign just didn’t stand out in Aurora.

But it stood out when I saw it.

A large American flag flew from the front porch, above the front-yard evergreen adorned with Christmas lights. The scene was downright Rockwellian. Almost.

Standing outside the side door with its “Land of the free because of the brave” window sticker, I suddenly had the fleeting feeling that this might not be such a good idea after all. Something told me he might be a gun owner.

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” could quickly turn into “Mississippi Burning,” but I had to ring the bell.

His wife was pleasant and said the sign isn’t racist, even though she’d urged him to spell “reneege” correctly.

She said that the guy down the road – quoted in a Buffalo News article – was the only one who has complained and that most people had no problem with it.

As we talked, a guy drove by in a pickup and honked in support. She noted proudly that the sign had been a topic on “The Rush Limbaugh Show.”

Then Joseph L. Shimburski pulled into the driveway.

It didn’t take long for the 78-year-old National Fuel retiree to tick off policy grievances that could more than justify opposing President Obama on ideological grounds: the Keystone pipeline, Benghazi, Solyndra, the auto bailout.

He was candid on every issue except the real one: If it’s purely about policy and not about race, why use an “i” instead of the “e”?

“That’s not even a word,” he said. “What can they complain about?”

I asked him about working with blacks at the utility; he named some friends. What would they think?

“They can think what they want,” he said. “It’s a free country.”

Then he added, “I’ve gotten more comments for it than against it.”

Shimburski is just your ordinary American. No white hoods or midnight meetings, just an attitude that people don’t acknowledge – perhaps even to themselves – as long as they can name a black friend.

I stuck out my hand. He removed a work glove and shook it.

“Have a good one,” he said, not knowing how difficult he had made it.

Pulling out of the driveway, I took a last look at the roadside sign.

On the way out of Aurora, I passed the high school again and got a slight glimmer of hope. Instead of passing the sign, most of the yellow buses returning to school were headed in the other direction.

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