

## Ayers inauguration

We attended the inauguration of Dr. Edward L. Ayers as president of the University of Richmond.

Candidly, we expected the inaugural environment to be a formal, stodgy extension of the antiquated tradition of UR, which historically has embraced pure conservatism and small-bore isolation.

When we left the campus situated in extraordinary natural beauty in the city's affluent West End, we must admit that we were duly impressed by the obvious, positive impact that Dr. Ayers already has had on Richmond's oldest institution of higher education.

We were inspired by his address pledging to promote diversity at the almost all-white private institution and to make "this a university for Richmond as well as of Richmond."

We also were positively surprised to be greeted by students wearing eye-catching T-shirts with a message that boldly rejected ignorance, prejudice and excuses.

And President Ayers, as the Free Press predicted last week, truly "got down," connecting with the people. At the inaugural dance, he refreshingly threw traditional, stifling conformity to the wind. Dressed in blue jeans for the inaugural dance, he took the stage as a DJ with a deep appreciation of jazz and also showed that he had rhythm.

We congratulate the 40-member Board of Trustees headed by George W. Wellde Jr., a New York investment banker, on its visionary selection of Dr. Ayers.

We also wish Dr. Ayers well as he continues to embark on what appears to be a highly promising new chapter for UR and its relevance in an ever-changing world in which the old order continues to collapse.

## The real Ukrops

Ukrop's Super Markets Inc. has decided to close its Harrison Street operation on the edge of Downtown.

The announcement was made in a letter sent to its loyal customers stating that Saturday, May 10, would be the last day for its store located adjacent to the Monroe Park campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

In the letter, the grocery chain, headed by James E. Ukrop and Robert S. Ukrop, stated that the chain had tried several strategies to make the store profitable. The Ukrop brothers moaned and groaned: "However, in spite of our best efforts, we continue to operate this location at a significant deficit; doing so can no longer be an option for us, especially in the light of today's economy."

It is noteworthy that one of those strategies was to drastically cut back on their token efforts to show appreciation and respect for the lucrative African-American market. The Ukrops, consistent with their political proclivities, cancelled advertising with the Free Press and ramped up advertising spending in the white-oriented, conservative Richmond Times-Dispatch while, at the same time, even reserving in-store newspaper distribution space for only white-owned newspapers.

In addition, the Ukrop brothers unsuccessfully sought to get the Free Press to replace its longtime black distributor with an incompetent out-of-state white distributor, which, acceptable to Ukrop's, would deliver the Free Press, at the earliest, a day late. The Free Press, of course, refused to bow to the chain's outlandish, inferior distribution scheme.

The chain's closing decision also raises questions about the level of the company's civic virtue. The chain opened the store just five years ago. The brothers' shut-it-down decision fails to give convincing evidence that the Ukrops are truly concerned — as they have professed — about doing their part to build a better Richmond — unless they can pull in a profit from each and every venture.

One of the Ukrop brothers boasts that he's a real competitor, especially in pickup athletic games. However, that competitive spirit seemingly started to fade when Kroger decided to place a more people-oriented store nearby. It begs the question as to whether the Ukrops really have game — except against pushovers.

The closing of the Ukrop's store at Harrison tells a lot about the real Ukrops.

## Obama on Va. Tech

Presidential candidate Barack Obama sent the Free Press the following statement on Wednesday, the anniversary of the Virginia Tech tragedy:

One year after the tragedy at Virginia Tech, families are still mourning, and our nation is still healing. As Americans gather today in vigils and 'lie-ins' — or pray silently alone — our thoughts are with those whose lives were forever changed by the shootings.

But one year later, it's also time to reflect on how violence — whether on campuses like Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University or on the streets of Chicago and cities across this nation — can be prevented. Clearly, our state and federal governments have to strengthen some laws and do a better job enforcing others.

But we all have a responsibility to do what we can in our own lives and communities to end this kind of senseless violence. That is still our task one year later, and it will be our ongoing task in the years to come.

No statements from the other presidential candidates — Sen. Hillary Clinton and Sen. John McCain — came our way.

## Question of the week



When will Chief Justice Leroy Rountree Hassell of the Virginia Supreme Court stop embarrassing himself and the Commonwealth by allowing sexist references to remain on the Supreme Court Web site?

## A tulip in Monroe Park



Jerome Reid/Richmond Free Press

## 'Perfect Union' speech forgotten

So, how's that national conversation on race coming along?

After Sen. Barack Obama delivered his "More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia in mid-March, many well-meaning folks agreed that it's time we Americans had a national conversation on race.

And a lot of others said, let's not.

For example, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly argues that Sen. Obama's not going to get the national conversation on race that he wants.

Why? Because liberals are so quick to condemn white people as racists if they "make a mistake."

"African-Americans should realize that this stuff drives good people away from constructive dialogue that might advance racial harmony in America," Bill O'Reilly preached. "The

race baiters and profiteers actually hurt minorities by inhibiting sincere discussion."

Yet, it lifted my optimism

### Clarence Page

that, after that explanation of why Americans won't have a conversation about race, Bill proceeded to hold a conversation about race.

As one of the participants, I pointed out this apparent contradiction. Bill was unmoved. Most ordinary people won't converse, he said, except with people they know really well. "They're too scared," he insisted.

True enough. In today's etiquette, race talk is a lot like sex talk. Everybody thinks they're an expert, but nobody wants to discuss it with strangers or in front of the children. Instead, if we talk about race at all, we tend to do it with people who are just like us and who can be safely presumed to agree with us already.

That's comforting, at least

temporarily, but it's not educational. Without knowledge of one another's cultures, we avoid understanding what's really on other people's minds. Instead, we stumble in our ignorance into the occasional racial shock — like the famously polarized reactions of black people and white people to the O. J. Simpson murder trial verdict.

It was just such a racial shock that led to Sen. Obama's Philadelphia speech. Inflammatory snippets from the Illinois senator's former minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, shocked many Americans.

Before the Wright snippets hit the fan, Sen. Obama carefully avoided specifics on the touchy issue of race in his campaign. He knew a political minefield when he saw one.

Many of Rev. Wright's critics who have never heard him give a full sermon have accused him of racism. Yet, as his white supporters have pointed out, his sermons have attacked racism, but not any

particular race. But the difference is lost on people who are less comfortable than even they might realize about the candor that is needed to cross our country's deep racial and cultural divides.

Sen. Obama received a lot of praise early in his campaign for "transcending race," whatever that might have meant to those who said it.

I think quite a few folks made the mistake of thinking that "transcending race" meant that Obama would take race off the table. Wrong.

If getting rid of racial problems was that easy, we Americans would have done it long ago. Instead, before we can get beyond race, we have to work out some more racial issues.

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## Connerly prowling again

The presidential election will be what moves most of us to change our routines

on Nov. 4 so that we can get to the polls and vote. However, many ballots will present other critical options for our consideration

— issues that could more directly effect life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is most assuredly so in Nebraska, Missouri, Colorado, Oklahoma and Arizona, which have all been infiltrated by Ward Connerly, once again on the rampage with what at least one writer has called "his anti-affirmative action jihad."

Mr. Connerly, of course, is the anti-affirmative action pusher who made his first big sale back in 1996, when he gave California a snout full of the stuff via Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action in hiring, admissions and contracting in public institutions.

Hooked on the ideology, the conservative lackey is ever on the prowl for a rush like that. Subsequent scores in Washington state and Michigan have not satisfied his craving. In his dreams, affirmative action would go the way of the homing pigeon. The five afore-named

western and midwestern states are merely his latest targets.

In "referendum," "initiative," or "proposition," the

### Deborah Mathis

voters would be asked to vote "yes" or "no" on a proposal absurdly named the Civil Rights Initiative. The title is, of course, purposefully misleading — designed to sound sanguine about civil rights protections. It is anything but that.

The effect of anti-affirmative action plebiscites has been the decimation of diversity. The University of California system, on whose board of regents Mr. Connerly once sat, has seen a troubling decline in its already woeful percentage of black enrollment. The same goes for the University of Michigan Law School, the bullseye of the affirmative action killing spree in that state.

But, then, Mr. Connerly is practiced at deception. I was there in 1996 when he, Abigail Thernstrom, Elaine Chao (now the secretary of labor) and other affirmative action reactionaries began something they call the American Civil Rights Institute, which eyes civil rights the way Hurricane Katrina eyed the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

What an irony it would

be if, in the year that a black man could assume the presidency, five more states sign on to the Connerly scheme. The tragedy is that the election of a black president might make some people believe policies that insist upon sharing opportunity with the whole of the American public, not just its historically privileged groups, are no longer necessary. They forget that, aside from Barack Obama, there would be 33,999,999 other black people looking for a door that doesn't slam shut on their chances.

But, what does Mr. Connerly care? He's got his. If there's demonstrable discrimination, tell it to the judge. And, as has been said, good luck with that.

No amount of reason, appeal to decency or racial integrity have any effect on him. He's a lost puppy. Unfortunately, he has influence. Worse, he has a plan.

It behooves good people to pay attention when the petitioners come knocking for signatures to get their deceitful plan on the ballots and, later, to make sure they actually vote against the measure.

The big-time, big-league presidential contest deserves the electorate's full attention. And so does at least one proposal that could easily get lost in all the excitement.

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