

DIALOGUE

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150-word limit. Writers must include home address and day and evening phone number.

CHIRP

E-mail your thoughts about the statement below in 25 words or less (plus name, town, and a daytime phone) to chirp@phillynews.com.

Nothing that happened on 9/11 would justify our country's use of interrogation techniques that amount to torture.

ISSUE | 'CAN'T BREATHE'

A quiet time for her

After repeated exposure to the video of Eric Garner's arrest in New York, I began to wonder how he could have said that he could not breathe 11 times had he been in a serious chokehold — as I was once. The most terrifying thing I experienced about a chokehold — as a small, older woman — was that I could not make a sound as I tried over and over to scream for help. Later, I regained consciousness on my back in the middle of the street, just yards from my front door. (And it was a very fine neighborhood.)

So I'm just saying: The New York police officer may not have been trying to really hurt Garner, as some media reports would have us believe. Was he, instead, trying to remove him from the spot on the sidewalk where he was causing problems for the shop owners who called for police help?

■ Pamela Sinclair Todd, Philadelphia



Police at the scene of a fatal shooting in Nicetown last month. JOSEPH KACZMAREK

ISSUE | NATION'S HEALTH

Top doc U.S. needs

Commentator Aseem R. Shukla explores whether the Senate would confirm the highly qualified Dr. Vivek Murthy for surgeon general in the face of Murthy's insistence on gun-violence research and limiting access to assault rifles, which has raised the ire of the National Rifle Association ("Health nominee targeted by gun lobby," Dec. 7).

Americans are increasingly buying guns, usually for self-defense. However, there are accidents and incidents: Somebody gets nervous or angry; it "goes off." Someone gets hurt or dies. People grieve and cannot trust their neighbors, and more buy guns. Murthy should be confirmed. The nation needs healing, not more guns.

■ Charlotte Gillespie, Moorestown



Workers protest during a national trade union demonstration in Brussels last month. GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT / Associated Press

ISSUE | WORKING

Ease overtime costs, spread the wealth?

It seems the Editorial Board has the idea of overtime pay backwards ("Reviving overtime," Dec. 10). Requiring an employer to pay time and a half or more is a disincentive for the employer to authorize more hours unless absolutely necessary.

However, if any employee wishes to work more hours at his own request, why not make working more hours at the same pay an incentive that works for the employee? Of course, it is different if the employer needs more work and pressures people to work overtime. But why not give workers an additional option to make more money?

■ Gardner A. Cadwalader, Philadelphia

ISSUE | TORTURE REPORT

Add another one to that terrorists-win list

What the Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture reveals is that the 9/11 terrorists were successful in getting some in the U.S. government to renege on the country's core values and succumb to the banality of evil ("Torture by any name," Dec. 11).

■ Bill Fanshel, Bryn Mawr

ISSUE | UTILITY SALE FAIL

Counting sheep on City Council

While City Council President Darrell L. Clarke deserves every bit of the condemnation for his inexcusable decision not to hold hearings on the proposed Philadelphia Gas Works sale, let's condemn in equal measure the 16 other Council members who chose not to introduce a bill to put the issue to public debate ("Deal breaker," Dec. 9).

And extra shame on those Council members who wanted to have it both ways by professing eagerness to have hearings.

■ Joan Markman, Philadelphia



Clarke ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff

ISSUE | SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

Neshaminy hit the books before new moves

An Inquirer report on the grade-configuration change and school consolidation projects in the Neshaminy School District failed to provide a complete picture ("Another uproar in Bucks district," Dec. 8). The result seems destined to stir the pot instead of informing readers.

The consolidation plan is the result of more than eight years of commissioned studies, demographic reports, committee meetings, open debate, and recommendations from a citizens' advisory committee — hardly the "fast track" process cited. Hearings were scheduled to comply with state guidelines without risking losing financing at historically low rates.

The grades 5-8 configuration plan was also a result of lengthy study and public debate. Describing it, the article notes unattributed "critics" without offering the balance of information from the study or from those who created it. We expect better from The Inquirer and hope in the future that readers will be given a much better, objective overview of a complex situation.

■ Scott Congdon, president, Neshaminy School Board, Feasterville

COMMENTARY

Campuses must confront assault issue

Beverly Willett is an author, lawyer, and mother of two daughters

My daughter belongs to a sorority. So I was concerned when I heard about Rolling Stone's account of an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia. The report stunned me, strung out as it was detail by salacious detail. Other than underage drinking, the Greek culture described bore no relationship to my days in college. But I knew times had changed.

Not long after publication, Rolling Stone admitted that the incident might not have occurred as reported. Predictably, news stories about journalistic hubris and setting back the clock for rape victims rolled out, followed by duels over whether claims about the fraternity rape culture have been overstated. No doubt there will be a barrage of follow-up stories and maybe even lawsuits.

And then what, after the scandal? Sadly, I suspect we'll remain exactly where we are now, stuck in a Nancy Grace world of finger-pointing and seeking convenient tales that fit the conclusions we've already drawn, with no progress toward solving the underlying problems.

Decades of rape-awareness programming apparently haven't made a dent in the frequency of campus rapes. So decades more probably won't shift the needle either. Nor will mere mattress-toting protests by college students or swelling our jails with the latest perpetrators.

Chances are there will be no change until those involved in the catfight acknowledge the need to broaden the base of accountability for sexual assault and until all those who contribute to the problem accept responsibility. That goes well beyond those who are usually singled out for blame — the patriarchy and universities that allegedly look the other way to protect their reputations.

Clearly, no rape victim is ever to blame, even if she says yes to walking up fraternity house stairs but no when she reaches the top.

And colleges aren't turning them into rapists once they set foot on campus soil. Sure, it's likely that many men arrive at college looking for no-strings sex. Why wouldn't they? They've been assaulted by sexually charged cultural messages from the cradle up.

And therein lies at least some of the culpability. Does this let men off the hook for criminal behavior? Certainly not. But could the culture shaping them be making matters worse? Certainly.

Even so, contrary to the stereotype, all fraternity men are not depraved animals. One of my sorority sisters, a single mother like me, raised a fine, just-gruated fraternity man. And there are many more

like him. But with the way the media often depict fraternities, any mother in her right mind would be afraid to send her daughter to college. By lumping all men together, the media miss a golden opportunity to enlist the good apples in efforts for positive change.

Can we assign some blame to the notion that sexual assaults are merely an unfortunate by-product of the party culture? Or, worse, the hookup culture? Both disconnect sex from love and affection, as well as responsibility and respect — all attributes, by the way, that are antithetical to rape.

The freshman coed depicted in Rolling Stone could easily be Everywoman. A girl, really, just learning how to navigate her way in the world. Young, inexperienced, anxious about being perceived as a wallflower.

But who makes women feel that way? College administrators? Just men? Or could it include other women, who are also culturally conditioned to believe that the primary point of sex is merely to have fun? Aren't these women victims of a culture that assaults them from the cradle, too? A culture that works overtime to convince them that casual, serial, nonmonogamous sex is the more enlightened viewpoint — the one that will gain them greater acceptance by their peers?

And is their only hope for protection, as some would claim, to just radical feminist protests seeking to topple the patriarchy? Or to engage in red-tape-wearing protests, enroll in sex clubs promoting female orgasms, haul mattresses around campus, and strut the SlutWalk, where students rally in revealing attire to condemn a rape culture that blames women's clothing for sexual assaults? I don't knock these efforts, but are all choices truly equal and available? Can mattress-toters be counted on to carry placards condemning "virgin shaming"? To advocate for women who choose not to walk up fraternity stairs in the first place? Women shouldn't have to endure a backlash condemning them for their actions, regardless of the choices they make.

In our society, we're predisposed to listen to and believe only those who already share our worldview. That narrow approach isn't going to help us end sexual assaults on campus. That kind of change will require honest, respectful conversation between the sexes, and among women and those in opposing political camps. And that dialogue will have to begin with an acknowledgment by all parties — men and women, students and parents, universities and the media — that members of both sexes are part of the problem. If they can do that, then both can, in turn, be part of the solution.

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The light is out there ... somewhere

Michael T. Dolan is a writer in West Chester

Imagine a boy on a plane, flying through the night sky, holiday travelers sitting side by side and row by row. Save for a few overhead spotlights shining down on crossword puzzles and magazines, the cabin is dark. The muffled hum of the engines outside lulls the passengers to sleep. The child would not join them. Sugar-plums could wait.

He looks around in disbelief: eyes shut, heads bobbed, pages turned. It seems he alone appreciates what could soon dwell on the horizon. It's just as well, for in the quiet darkness, he feels as if he is the keeper of a great secret. Back at home, he often hides beneath a fort made of blankets and sheets, leaving the adults in their world while disappearing into his own. Such is the cabin now.

the boy's mind becomes a metronome, conducting the orchestra's silent waltz:

On-2-3, Off-2-3, On-2-3, Off-2-3.

He surveys the darkness as he counts, looking for another red light.

It has to be out there. Somewhere. Even if I can't see it yet. It has to be!

He hopes, prays, and watches.

On-2-3, Off-2-3, On-2-3, Off-2-3.

The window fogs up with breath. The child takes his finger and traces his name backward in the condensation. If he appears now, he'll know it's me! Just as quickly, he squeaks the window clean with the side of his hand and refocuses.

The light is out there ... somewhere. He is out there ... somewhere ... flying ... with me!

The boy gazes.

Some 35,000 feet below, faith is just as strong in a young girl. The house is festive and noisy, but the hour is getting late. Soon it would be time to call the celebrations a night and head home.

"Do you think he's close, Dad?" "I'm not sure."

"Let's go check!" With that I follow my daughter out of the house and into the wintry eve. Standing on the sidewalk, we look toward the heavens. The sky is clear and the moon new, giving the stars a chance to shine this holy night.

"Look, Dad! Look! There he is!" I follow her gaze.

And there it is, a blinking red light making its way across the sky. I kept time:

On-2-3, Off-2-3, On-2-3, Off-2-3.

My daughter stands transfixed at the awesome sight above her, stunned yet not surprised, in disbelief yet believing. After a magical minute or two, the light fades into the night. She quickly retreats into the house, excited to proclaim the good news.

I simply stand there and smile, thinking to myself, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

Contact Michael T. Dolan via www.conversari.com.



Students light candles during a Dec. 5 vigil in Charlottesville, Va., in support of sexual-assault victims. RYAN M. KELLY / Associated Press