

A South Bend school board campaign

I did fail to win the election, and, as most of you know, I do not like to lose - but almost all the other objectives were achieved -

It was a fascinating first-time “view from the inside” of a political campaign - so here is a brief story of the more interesting parts - a brief history, plus a bit of philosophy as we go.

Rationale for becoming a candidate

In December 2007, there was a public outcry in South Bend when the 7-member school board attempted to remove the Superintendent Dr. Robert Zimmerman from his post after 15 months of his initial 3-year contract. The outcry - from the public, the parents, the teachers, the business community and the Mayor - forced them to reconsider - and they gave him a six month time-line to justify his work. In June 2008, they fired him, following which they gave him a quarter-million dollar buy-out package. Five of the seven board members voted to fire and also to pay him the buy-out package. Two of the five were the at-large members whose terms would be up (Rosen and Barnbrook). The two district members with terms up (Sniadecki of district 3, and Jones of district 4) both voted against the firing and buy-out.

Zimmerman had taken over from long-time Superintendent Joan Raymond: she had reorganized the system, introducing “plan-Z”, re-arranged the whole curriculum, and developed a tight-knit administration in her own image. When Zimmerman came in at the end of the summer of 2006, she had refused to leave until October 1st, giving him an office in a then-unused and isolated school building (for August and September). Not an auspicious beginning, especially with what became a mostly antagonistic board and administration against him.

His mode of “working-around” the situation was to bring in an alternative, parallel administration - a new Deputy Superintendent Myrtle Wilson (a promotion from within the system), a new high school coordinator Gene Hollenberg (a middle-school principal from the neighboring PHM school system - just before his arrival his house was destroyed by a summer tornado), and a new middle school director Tom Fujimura (a principal of the South Bend Greene Intermediate Center). As part of our NISMEC initiative I worked quite closely with all three, and found them helpful and eager for collaboration to provide professional development in science and math at all grade levels - we initiated several projects and other grant applications. Zimmerman was aware of our developments, but not involved. He seemed more committed to progress in helping the morale of the teachers at all levels, and was developing good rapport by visiting as many schools as possible. In retrospect, this was probably detrimental (time-consuming) to his developing working relationships with board members. It was clear also that, in general, his decision-making was slow, particularly in terms of contracts and other budgetary aspects.

These aspects made clear that there would be great local interest in the coming board elections, and there would be many candidates wanting to run for election, principally in the at-large elections.

I had other more personal/ulterior motives for considering becoming a candidate:

Motive number 1: our 4 and a half year-old **NISMEC** organization (Northern Indiana Science, Mathematics and Engineering Collaborative <http://www.nd.edu/~nismec/nismec11.htm>) has been successfully expanding, so that now all six higher educational institutions in the South Bend area are actively involved, plus the 3 major school systems - Mishawaka, Penn-Harris-Madison (PHM) and south Bend, plus local businesses. Access to supporting the teachers in the South Bend system has greatly improved since the arrival of Zimmerman (attempts to engage the Joan Raymond administration had been fruitless); the PHM and Mishawaka administrations have welcomed us with open arms, especially since it costs them no dollars, and we are bringing in funds - from the Indiana DOE, from the Indiana STEM network, from the Siemens foundation and elsewhere. Clearly the departure of Zimmerman might return to an administration unable to look such a gift-horse in the mouth.

Motive number 2: In late 2007, we had begun an initiative **HOST** - the **H**ands-**O**n Science and Technology center. This center is proposed to provide opportunity for hands-on science learning for the whole community - students, parents, neighbors, etc. We have spent the time so far in building support and awareness for the idea, with educators, local business and political leaders, and with other community leaders. There are many opportunities for such a center to coordinate with the expanding “museum

campus” just west of downtown South Bend, with the Salvation Army’s proposed new Kroc center nearby, and with the development of other active outreach research centers at Notre Dame such as the planned Innovations Park (<http://www.innovationparknd.com/>) and the MIND nanoelectronics research center (http://www.nanowerk.com/nanotechnology/labs/Midwest_Institute_for_Nanoelectronics_Discovery_MIND.html) . All the local school boards will need to be aware of these developments as employment opportunities for their students ; in addition, the influx of white-collar workers to the community will only take place if we have excellent schools for their children.

The Campaign

The South Bend school board has 5 district representatives, and 2 at-large, each voted in for 4-years on a staggered basis - this was the year for the 2 at-large and districts 3 and 4 representatives - I live in District 4, which is mostly the near-west side including many African-Americans and Hispanics, but also a significant lower-income white population. I decided not to run against Dawn Jones, and she was eventually re-elected unopposed. It was to be a much more difficult task to run at-large as a virtual unknown, but those were the representatives, Rosen and Barnbrook, who had voted to remove Zimmerman, and it was important to remove them. So into the 15-army fray I went, filing on the final day in late August. The 2 incumbents filed, and also an ex-Mayor, Roger Parent - so they were clearly the principal opposition.

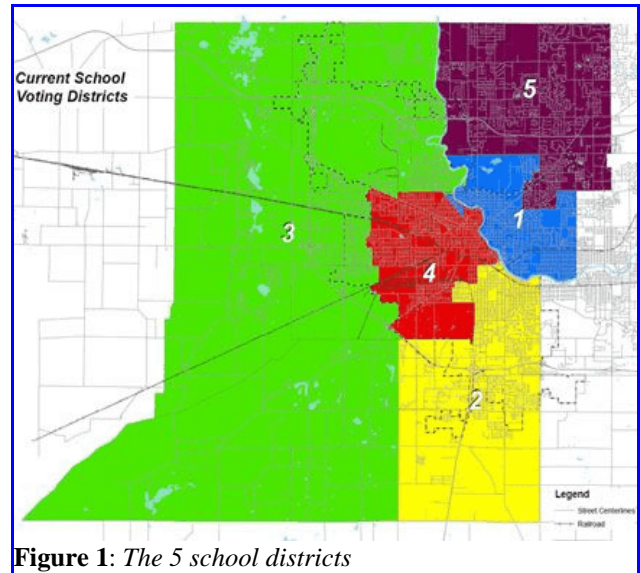


Figure 1: The 5 school districts

We established a campaign committee - chair, treasurer and 3-4 other members; set up the website (which adjusted as necessary during the campaign), and planned strategy. I put in \$2000 into the campaign account and started a fundraising drive - mostly from friends and colleagues, which eventually netted about \$1100.

In the initial month, several forums were arranged - we ended up with about 6 in all, a couple of them televised and put on station websites (in part). Unfortunately, most forums had only 20 to 30 attendees, and each of the 15 candidates did not have long to say much in even a 2-hour forum. Nico helped develop and design our campaign literature - yard signs, flyers, bumper stickers, etc, and we came up with the slogan to “reconnect” the school board with the teachers, parents and community.

A key to success would be endorsement by three key organizations - the teachers (the NEA), the Chamber of Commerce, and the newspaper. All candidates answered their questionnaires and had half-hour interviews with each organization... The first to strike was the National Education Association of South Bend (the NEA) - and I was very pleasantly surprised to get their endorsement, as also did Roger Parent. This meant that the race was on and very well worth running; in retrospect, it was my work with the teachers over the past few years, plus my Chicago experience in teacher support, plus, my ideas of how to develop a better school system that led to the endorsement. In addition, the endorsement meant some financial support, unlike the endorsements of the Chamber and the newspaper.

The other two endorsement interviews went very well, I knew some of the Chamber people, and I was quite optimistic - unfortunately my optimism was misplaced - which is when I began to realize that all elections are about politics - a tricky game, with twists and turns quite unlike a research laboratory, and with deep currents of loyalty running below the surface: about 10 days before the election, the Chamber endorsed Roger Parent, the ex-Mayor, and the incumbent Ann Rosen. The politicians and their business friends had struck! A newcomer like me was not yet in the ring - what was it that the old Mayor Daley’s assistant said? - if you were not invited to come, then you are nobody! Then the newspaper - of course they endorsed Roger Parent - they even said nice things about this Physics Professor Gordon Berry - but to endorse two old white men in an integrated community was clearly too much, and they endorsed the

leading African American candidate Stephanie Spivey. She was to be the only candidate not endorsed by the NEA to get in.

So that meant the hard work of “becoming known” was even harder. The plan became door-to door work talking and distributing flyers in the two “interior districts” (#4 & #1), and mailing campaign postcards to the 15,000 “most likely voters” in the “outer districts” (#2, #3, #5). We set up our “printing press” (computer, color laser printer and large paper cutter) in the dining room, bought card stock and lots of colored ink, and away we went - we (that’s me! With some help from Mary, Lois, Dan and Amanda on weekends) eventually made and distributed about 4000 2-sided quarter page flyers, plus about 2000 2-sided business cards principally distributed at the polling places.

With 16 days to go we had our campaign committee and supporters’ “action” meeting - only about a dozen out of 80 invitations came - an indication that this was going to be a campaign by the very few - not surprising since most people have full time jobs plus other interests, despite being enthusiastic and supportive in theory. Fortunately, the following week was the Notre Dame semester break, and a great deal of open time for me -every evening was a meeting group to talk to, and a couple of lunch meetings; otherwise early mornings were spent posting signs, and calling people. We eventually had about 370 signs posted on the main streets and in people’s yards. (The remainder were retained for the polling places) The afternoons were used in walking, talking and distributing flyers going door-to-door.

What did I see in these walks? The most amazing thing was the number of empty and/or “for sale” houses - I never found two consecutive blocks with no houses for sale: and very often in a single block there were several such houses - across the whole city (at least districts 1 and 4). I had always thought the Historic District was unique - just behind the historic houses, the blocks are littered with empty boarded-up dwellings. My conclusion is that this economy is going to take years to recover.

Of course, the principal dwellers were the dogs - at least their presence meant the house was occupied. Some of them were like small horses (or bears), and I was grateful that no chains broke nor glass windows shattered - many “beware” signs, probably even where no dog existed - I liked the ones that gave the message “don’t worry about the dog, but beware of the owner”!

With only one exception, the people were friendly and, in general, delighted to see me in order to get information about at least one of the fifteen candidates. Almost all - up in the 80% range - wanted to know who the incumbents were - so that they could vote against them. The prime motivator was clearly the waste of the \$250,000 buyout. It was an incredibly enjoyable experience getting to know the

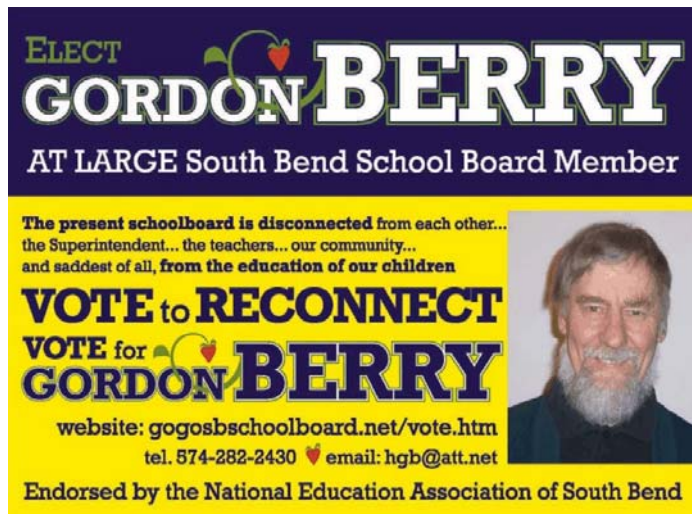


Figure 2 Flyer front

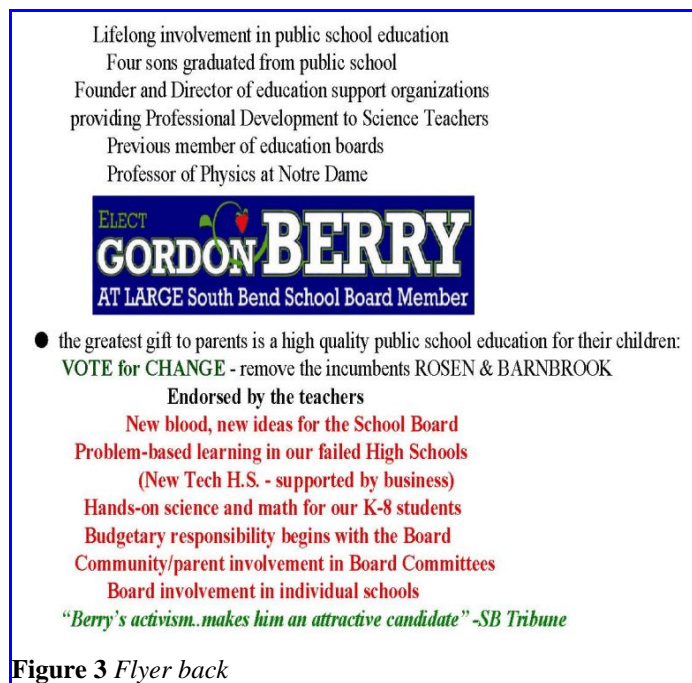


Figure 3 Flyer back

neighborhoods and meeting people who are not physics professors, and who are interested in how to improve the school system; even though many have no children, or their children are in catholic or other private schools, they were interested in the election. I estimate that I visited more than half of all the inhabited houses in school district zones #1 and #4, and probably talked, minimally in most cases, to about 1 in 5 of them. Amanda Serenevy did the same for a few hours on the Saturday 16 days before the election in district 1.

We have a local street map highlighted with the streets covered. We were fortunate that the whole of the 16 day period leading up to the election was dry and fairly warm, with the leaves gradually changing their colors - the changes seemed a good prognostication for change for Obama, as well as for the school board. With that in mind, and thanks to an initial idea from Rich Williams, I added to some of the flyers: "**The Irish ticket - O'Bama, O'Biden & O'Berry**", and gave these to people with Obama or other Democratic signs in their yard.

Two other campaigning activities took place during the 16 days before the election:

- the two Saturday mornings before the election, (Dan Holm and I the first one, Mary at the second one) we handed out flyers at the Farmers' Market.

- on that first Saturday, Lois Holm handed out flyers at the "early voters" line at the City-County building (at 50 feet from the doors). This seemed to be very effective - since most voters had little or no idea about the school board candidates, and reaching them just as they voted was probably very helpful - more about this in the next section. Subsequently, I visited that line every day till the election - typically an hour or so in the morning (voting started at 8 am), an hour at lunchtime, and an hour before the closing at 4 pm. During the final week, more school board candidates came to the line (most often Spivey and Brandy-Comer, but also representatives of Sniadecki and Downey for the 3rd district). I even met a few physics professors coming in to vote. One drawback was the 2 entry doors to voting, which meant that only about half the voters were intercepted - only on the final Sunday, when voting took place from noon to 4 pm was only a single door in operation - that day had many more voters, with a typically 200 feet-long line, but with 5 or 6 different schoolboard candidates plying their wares.

On the final Monday I broke down the voting region into 4 sections (NE, SE, NW and SW) and that evening started delivering signs to the polling places (we had targeted about 90 "high-density" polling precincts), managing to cover the NW and most of the NE section by 8 pm. On the tour, I ran into Kyle Chamberlin (another candidate) doing the same, plus two Obama/Democrat representatives putting up their signs (about 7 signs at each polling place).

Voting day - Tuesday, 4th November

Up at 3:30 am, I set out before 5 am to put up signs at the remaining 50 or so polling places - it was quite amazing to find that now all signs were swamped by at least 14 (7 each) of the Democrat and Republican candidates' signs, but I completed my tour by about 6:30 am. By 6 am voter lines were forming, and some places were quite long with above 100 people in line. I quickly returned to the one with the longest line (St. Matthews, at Miami/Dubail) in the SE section - a mostly working class white and Hispanic area - and then moved over to Studebaker school (Dubail) which also seemed quite active until about 10 am. But the voters were mostly gone by 10 am, and remained that way throughout the rest of the day, even in the closing 4 - 6 pm period.

This final day, I was not on my own - about 8 teachers plus 4 of our committee members were out at the polling places for various periods of time - typically 1 to 4 hours. After touring around checking out several polling places, it was apparent that minimal voting was taking place everywhere: I settled on the Cornerstone Church (a double precinct) in the NE section where there was a fairly steady flow of voters; also, most of the time no other candidate representatives were there - Kyle Chamberlin's mother showed up there in the afternoon - one voter fell off the curb which brought two fire engines and their personnel, - but otherwise pretty peaceful.

We all expected a late rush of voters, so we had more of us at the precincts, but the rush never came - at least at any of the dozen or so precincts that I visited. Most probably an effect of the 25% early/absentee voting. I ended up at the Brown Intermediate Center, exchanging pleasantries and information with two Sniadecki volunteers (teachers there), and a Roger Parent volunteer.

Thus, the end of campaigning - just the results to wait for - and the analysis of what went right or wrong...

A nice celebration in the evening at Bruno's Pizza Parlour on the south-west side, hosted by the NEA, flooded with the celebrating green shirts of the Sniadecki supporters and TV interviews for the successful NEA candidates Sniadecki and Parent..Results were already obvious when I arrived - and complete by 9 pm - a quite amazing speed in the recording of the St. Joseph County results.

Reasons for failure/success

Lack of recognition of Berry the candidate and what he stood for was the primary reason for failure: why did we not overcome this deficit?

First, we did not really know the vital parts of a successful campaign - we were learning as we went along..

- 1.** We started too late - leaving only one month for the campaign - almost all our competitors had been campaigning (at fairly low levels) throughout the summer.
- 2.** Our organization - much too small - our active committee was only 4-6 people, and none of us had run a political campaign before.
- 3.** The consequences of items 1 and 2, we never generated a large scale "get out the message" - despite frequent mailings to friends, associates and colleagues for both funds and for action on the ground. Non-political friends were very supportive and understood the issues involved, but they could/would not change their on-going busy lives to help; and also many of our educational network colleagues live outside the schools area, reducing their interest in the issues. No blame assigned - just the facts. A major campaign meeting to which we expected 50-60 attendees ended up with only a small nucleus of friends - a clear indicator of who was going to do the work in the campaign to come.
- 4.** Almost no-one looked at the website - only 300 in all, only a gradual increase in daily "hits" to 30 on the Monday before the election; and even those visitors probably only looked at the first few lines of the site.
- 5.** The campaign literature - especially initially, it was much too wordy and unfocused on the issues. As it became clear that almost no-one read it - just interested in a "sound-bite", we did give more definition including direct attacks on the incumbents. The printing press being in the diningroom was an important advantage here .
- 5b.** The "Reconnect" slogan was helpful and differentiated me from the other candidates, but did not completely clarify that I was not an incumbent.
- 6.** The forums were helpful, mainly because the other candidates were either unfocused, or had only one issue to talk about, and most of them were unused to public speaking - the misfortune was that almost no-one saw or heard the forums (the fora?), and only 3-4 questions could be asked in each time available.
- 7.** The distribution of yard signs probably helped - we concentrated on placing them on the major highways, mostly near empty lots or right on the road fringe. Somewhat illegal or at least against local bylaws - consequently quite a number disappeared (probably about 20 of the 350). Most other campaigns had more signs in private yards of friends/supporters, which were not seen by as many people. However, our signs only arrived 2 weeks before the election - probably about 2 weeks too late - Spivey was the only candidate with her signs out one month before the election, and that gave her a lot of recognition, and probably many of the early voters.

The additional height of our sign holders (an extra 20 cents per sign) was well worth the expense, allowing us to put them in long grass, and usually well above our competitors.

We kept 100 signs in reserve for the polling places: although in principal an important part of most campaigns, they were almost worthless in this case because of the large number of signs from the many other races - from President of the USA down to County Recorder positions - giving just a forest of signs.

- 8.** The lack of a strong ground game on voting day was a principal weakness of the campaign. I had not realized the importance of having LOTS of people at the polls - we had only a dozen people for 139 precincts, and most of those were there for 1 hour or a few hours. I was amazed to find that every district #3 precinct had one or two green tee-shirted Sniadecki volunteers - there for the whole day. That was definitely the way to be effective! Our dozen, mostly teachers, did their bit valiantly, but we could probably have picked up 100's or even a few thousand voters in the best of circumstances (but see the next item).

In retrospect, the three NEA endorsed candidates should have coordinated our precinct workers better so that all precincts were covered - the Sniadecki workers handed out leaflets with all three names - Sniadecki, Berry and Parent - but only within district #3.

- 9.** The early voting - 2 weeks and 2 days long - all took place at the City-County building - we only realized

its importance after 5 days of voting. This is probably where Spivey got a lot of her vote - she was the only candidate at the polling place; many of the early voters were African Americans who were following up the very effective Obama campaign to vote early, and they knew Spivey from her earlier work in the summer.

10. The NEA endorsement was vital to the campaign, but the loss of the other two endorsements - the Chamber of Commerce, and the South Bend Tribune - both of which came in the final week, really hurt the viability of the campaign. I never expected the Chamber to endorse one of the incumbents - it probably gave Rosen several thousand extra votes - at least the difference between her and incumbent Barnbrook who got no endorsements, and in 2004 had outvoted Rosen by 3000 votes; and doubtless helped Spivey over the top.

11. During the last week, I commented to Bill Sniadecki on the lack of visibility of Kim Barnbrook - she had not appeared at any forums, and had very few yard signs up: he said "beware of the polling day surprises": I believe he was thinking in part of his green-coated army with free pens swamping the polling places (he won 2-1 over an opponent he had only narrowly beaten 4 years before), but also he knew that both Barnbrook and Rosen had their group of supporters mostly still intact: I was certainly taken by surprise - on the basis of my canvassing, I had thought that both were behind me, and that Spivey was the real challenge - it shows the strength of incumbency and name recognition - they both beat me.

Will I do it again?

Well, it was a lot of fun, even though it was hard work: walking the streets daily for 2 to 4 hours for two weeks led to a very healthy loss of weight and general health improvement. Some nervousness towards the end, and a serious lack of sleep trying to get everything done. It did help that my teaching duties were minimal since I had taught both my courses previously.

But one major goal of the campaign was achieved - the incumbents were voted out - I ran to improve the school board in order for the next steps of bringing community involvement into the school system - there is no reason to stop in pursuing that goal - at least Roger Parent wants to do the same.

Other goals of bringing more recognition about the needs for better science and math education, for guided inquiry methods in teaching, and for our collaborations of NISMEC and HOST were broadcast to a wider audience. Those campaigns will continue - I see bringing NISMECs goals particularly into the

improvement of the high schools through development of the New Technology High School initiative.

The school board election in two years time involves only the three districts not involved this year (Districts #1,3, & 5). Those three incumbents also need removing, but I do not live in their districts, so others will have to do the work. In 4 years time, the issues will hopefully be quite different, but obviously District #4 could become a target - it depends on the effectiveness of the incumbent Dawn Jones, and whether she will be running for another term. In addition, we will be watching carefully the effectiveness on the board of Stephanie Spivey.

I owe it to my principal supporters - the teachers and the NEA - to at least keep in mind another attempt.

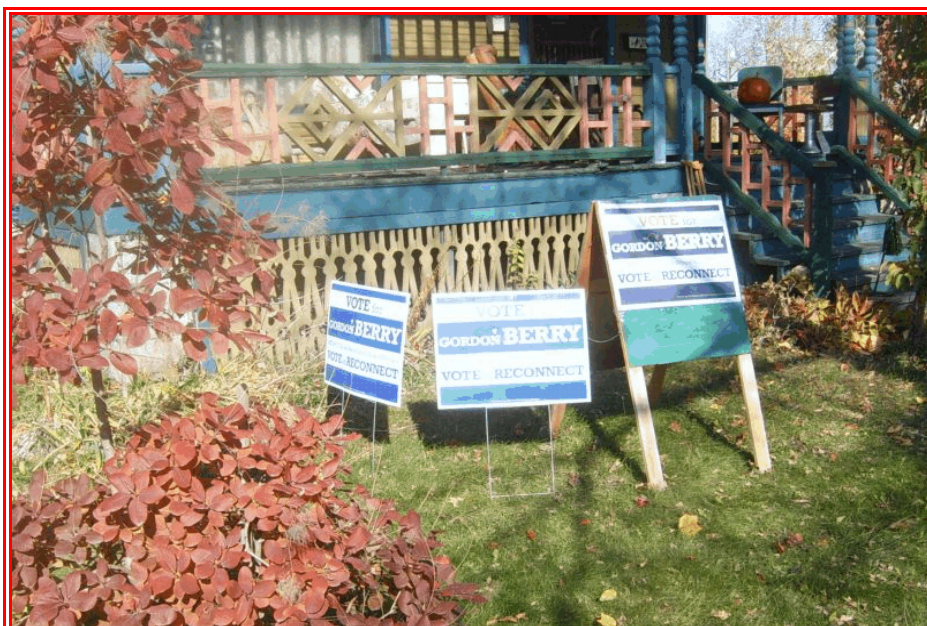


Figure 4: Signs left over in our front yard - the strawberry was mistaken for a heart by most people, but it worked just as well.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the people who worked hard for me - Carolyn Peterson and Mary Ann Zimmerman at the NEA-SB - they were guides to whatever success we had. Lois and Daniel Holm helped to keep our little committee on a positive slope forwards. My teacher friends - those who were old-pros in school board campaigns, and those who were so positive about my running - they all networked around their friends in the schools - there are just not enough teacher-voters to overwhelm the rest of the electorate. You have no idea how much their positive remarks made the race worth running - and especially because, in the end, teacher morale and understanding is such a vital aspect of excellent schools. My Notre Dame supporters, especially from the physics department, did their bit, but as I mentioned to some of them, all we needed was another 5000 voting physicists ...

And finally my wife, Mary Hynes-Berry - so full of ideas at every turn, driving over every weekend from Chicago, and then unfortunately having to miss election day itself and its aftermath: she had a very good reason - the following day she led a key session at the Dallas meeting of NAEYC - the National Association for the Education of Young Children - an overflow crowd of hundreds for a 3-hour session - part of her life's work in helping teachers to learn about learning - a pro compared with me. She also comes from a very politically-involved family - her oldest brother Denis from Minnesota called at 9 pm election night to ask about Barack Obama's chances in Indiana - he was running slightly behind at the time - as soon as I mentioned that the Lake and Porter County results were still coming in, he relaxed, knowing from his previous work in DC as an aide to Birch Bayh that the election could be clinched. The real reason for the loss appeared as son Sebastien caught me out - posing on the phone as a South Bend Tribune reporter questioning my terrorist associations with the infamous Annenberg Committee - was it because it was only my wife who was working with Ayers and other suspicious characters that Barack's coat-tails did not extend to my election too?

So ends a brief, brisk chapter of life; undoubtedly there are other interesting chapters to follow..

Thanks everyone — Gordon



Figure 5 *Obama rescuing a tattered USA*
An artwork by Nico Berry

