

06/19/2007

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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Our goal should be global understanding

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Austin American-Statesman Tuesday, June 19, 2007

On June 10, Rafael Nadal, a 21-year-old Spaniard, won the major French Open tennis title for the third consecutive year. More remarkable than his youthful triumph was his declaration afterward, "All this is a dream. I will continue working to return to the final next year and to be able to speak French."

When was the last time any major American figure expressed a sincere interest in mastering a foreign language?

After 9/11 President Bush did not urge Americans to learn more about foreign cultures. Nor did he recommend to the Department of Education or to young people in our country that they should concentrate on foreign languages, the simplest way to understand the values and mindsets of other cultures. Instead our president urged us to "get down to Disney World in Florida and enjoy life."

From Barcelona, the United States looks like one giant Disneyland, a theme park removed from the world's realities, a land where news headlines focus on Paris Hilton's jail wardrobe and even the summer blockbuster "Pirates of the Caribbean 3" takes us beyond the world's end.

And now the Walt Disney Co. wants to make sure that we do not see problems in our own country and is suing Anaheim, Calif. Three of the five members of the Anaheim City Council think 225 subsidized housing units should be built near Disneyland to make life better for low-wage people, like many Disney employees, who cannot afford to live within reasonable commuting distance of "the happiest place on Earth." But Disney thinks families with ample disposable incomes should not have to drive past poor people in order to get to their theme parks.

Cleveland, my hometown, is the biggest poor city in the United States. In the vice-presidential debate at Case Western Reserve University in October 2004, Vice President Dick Cheney was asked about Cleveland's jobless rate, which was then 31 percent.

Cleveland was in the news because its Cavaliers were in the NBA finals against the San Antonio Spurs. Cavs superstar LeBron James has made headlines, too, because he is wealthy enough to tear down a \$1.7 million house in Bath, Ohio, to make room for a 34,000-square-foot house. It will have a bowling alley, casino, barber shop and movie theater.

Why does this conspicuous consumption by an athletically gifted, but financially ill-advised, 22-year-old high school graduate attract more attention than the sobering fact that nothing has improved in Cleveland since the last presidential campaign? According to the most recent statistics, 32.4 percent of Cleveland residents live below the poverty level.

Such big social problems take a long time to solve and sometimes things get worse before they get better. Government officials could be taking Cleveland's high poverty rate seriously.

Not the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. The Economic Commentary section of its Web site is a kind of Disneyland. We learn there that things in Cleveland do not look so bad if we factor in suburbanites in the surrounding metropolitan statistical area (MSA). Only 9.6 percent of the larger population pool live below the poverty level.

About one out of 10 adults in the northeastern Ohio MSA cannot provide a minimally decent living wage for themselves or their families. But the Federal Reserve Bank tells us that the real problem here is that Cleveland's population dropped 11.5 percent between 2000 and 2005, while the number of residents below the poverty level increased by 20,000.

Put another way, if wealthier people would just stay put in Cleveland and those who cannot afford to move would just stop getting poorer, the statistics would not be so bad.

Suburban sports fans come into the city for the games and walk to fashionable bars and restaurants that surround the pro sports venues. Just a few blocks outside this pleasure zone, as invisible as Disney wants subsidized urban housing to be, are vacant commercial buildings, run-down hotels and miles and miles of urban decay and despair.

A few years ago, I went back to my old Lithuanian-Polish working-class neighborhood on Cleveland's near east side. The 100-year-old three-family house where I was born was still standing, but the block had vacant, rubble-strewn lots, empty store-fronts, boarded-up houses. The Lithuanian Roman Catholic church, St. George's, where I went to kindergarten, was protected by tall security fences and barred windows. It looked more like the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville than a church.

Our post-industrial urban poverty is not going away, no matter how well the Cavaliers are playing, how we massage statistics or how many trips we take to Disney World.

The first foreign language we should acquire is reality.

Palaima is a UT classics professor. This is the sixth in a series of columns from Spain.