

The Miami Herald

Chess team slighted by poor coverage

Neighbors - Soapbox

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The entire staff of The Herald should take their assumed role of community leader a bit more seriously.

As an influential media in our wonderful community, it should be proud to share the singular moments of triumph and courage of our residents and proclaim to the world, or the nation, or at least our own community that our values, beliefs, and efforts are worth embracing and are at work here.

The Herald staff should accept those opportunities to share with the business, financial, and educational organizations that this is a place to relocate, build a future, and raise a family. But, alas, another golden opportunity to sound the clarion of optimism, hope, and pride has gone ``six feet under."

On April 19, The Herald chose, with a great deal of intentionality, to highlight an event so enormous in its success, so brazen in its refusal to roll over and die, so courageous in its passionate human spirit, and so representative of our community's struggle to overcome adversity and inequity and print this event under the heading of "Region/Deaths" and above the heading ``Obituaries."

Don't interpret this to suggest that I am speaking against the listings of our fallen and silenced loved ones who have been placed in eternal rest and peace. However, I am outraged that our community paper, that wants us to continue to subsidize its income, couldn't find a more respectful and appropriate place to run its short, eight-paragraph story about its greatest asset, its children.

On April 11, eight days before this story ran, the 2002 National High School Chess Championships concluded. So what, you say. These are just a bunch of rich, smart kids that sit around a table and move a couple of tokens around the board; so what, yawn, yawn, yawn.

Well, this story is big -- bigger than its placement on the same page as obituaries, burial services, and a medical chief jailed for accused insurance fraud. Bigger than the cover page for Metro Miami with the new traffic-light-colored beach flags or a story on developing war chests for the upcoming spending campaign to elect a governor.

You see, this particular high school team is from the inner city, a place most of us don't venture into, a place where some can't be proud of because of their prejudices, misperceptions and fears.

But this inner city high school is a monument of pride, passion, and determination. They also have a community that is proud of their accomplishments.

The inner city students that attend this high school and play for their chess team accomplished the unthinkable: they lived the dream of winning usually reserved for "sports" teams.

This remarkable team of students -- senior Clifton Brown, junior Victor Agosto, and sophomores Alan Estrada and Joseph Lopez -- defeated 600, yes 600, other students on 80 teams to capture the national championship for their division.

This team of four young and determined academic athletes did the unthinkable. Entering the fourth round of the national championships, they were in 13th place.

But they did us proud! At this point you may find yourself saying maybe the story should have moved from the "dying" page to the Sports or Living and Arts cover page since it dealt with the human condition.

I haven't told you this school has a teacher who also coaches these wonderfully talented students. In fact, this teacher, Mario Martinez, has coached, supported, nurtured and trained his students over the past four years.

And during that time, this inner city high school with students from all nationalities with a rich culture of diversity, under Mr. Martinez's tutelage, has won the last four national championships.

This program is consistent with any other successful sports program or academic curriculum. It is a winner and a source of pride for all.

This school, Jackson High, with the talented coach and the courageous students, is our toast to one aspect of the successful public high school. Jackson, with its national championship, should make us smile and warm our souls for what it has given our children from this singular and important event.

Our community should revel in having the best and demand, yes demand, appropriate coverage and placement in the media that shares its name with the school and community at large, Miami.

Would it have been so wrong to have this story on the front cover of the newspaper or have the pictures of the coach and students grace the article?

I've seen pictures of animals accompanying a story in the paper, but yet, no one felt compelled to take the picture of these four students and their coach.

Our public must ask the questions: Why are there no pictures honoring these students? Why was the article placed in the section reserved for the honored deceased? Why are there only eight short paragraphs and not a full story on the lives of these children, their histories and the challenges they had to overcome?

Why is this story buried on page four and not paraded in the sunlight of a cover page extolling the successes of our school system and community?

I am so very proud of what has been accomplished by so many with so little. I am very proud of Jackson High's National Championship Chess Team and the students, staff, community and family it represents.

I hope you, the readers, are equally proud and don't let this letter pass as voicing your opinion. Let's tell our editors, publishers, advertising agents, etc., to become accountable for their "talk," to take some time, and present this story correctly.

Get some background on the lives of these students, talk about their heart and courage, include some color photographs, and locate this story in a place of pride and celebration in the newspaper. Don't let them do this to our children. Speak up or become part of the problem, too.

So, Herald, truly support our children, communities, and public schools and move our agenda from the dying to the living, from the complacent to the responsible, and from the negative to the positive.

Thank you for allowing me to voice my opinion without fear of retaliation, retribution, or censorship.

LARRY FELDMAN

***DIRECTOR
REGION IV***