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## Washington Journal: Hope Rises in Real-Life Washington

by Francis X. Clines

Muddling beyond the winter solstice, this city has an extra edge of hope beyond the ritual emotions of the holiday, for not only Santa but George W. Bush is coming to town.

The president-elect (or -select, in the view of griping Democrats who plan to protest the inauguration) is already stirring the familiar mix of optimism and wariness from the ordinary, uncelebrated residents who live at this city's heart yet remain outside the bubble of capital power. "Tell the education president to call me; I have ideas for him," said Nancy Schwalb, a writer and volunteer teacher fighting to see her creative writing workshop survive in the budget-strapped public schools of the vast area of humbler, workaday Washington known dismissively as East of the River.

This is the working-class, poverty-lashed region just across the Anacostia from the seat of national power. It is ignored in the press releases of ambitious incumbents, but it thrives and glistens with life. It seems an ideal laboratory environment that goes untapped by the legions of social planners and political strategists ever theorizing their fresh goods -- solutions for the people's problems -- that trundle handsomely packaged from think-tank factories west of the river in the city's expense-account sector.

"Political epochs grew wild, as in distance," wrote one of Ms. Schwalb's 13-year-old student poets, imagining the nation's solstice mood from her outlook across the Anacostia in the threadbare but doughty Charles Hart Middle School. "A full rotation of the view until America goes blind."

At Hart, the school budget left teachers paying for the holiday party pizza out of their own pockets. Ms. Schwalb had to forgo the space heater for her chilled classroom because it shorted out the school's dated wiring, which still lags behind the high-tech education promises of the successful campaigners across the river.

There is some hope for the incoming president west of the river, too, at Stevens Elementary School. This is a drab, historic school opened 114 years ago for the children of emancipated slaves. It still operates dynamically on 21st Street, a few doors north of the K Street power corridor of lawyers and lobbyists. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, one of the many nonprofit agencies updating their agendas for the new president, has put Stevens on its national list of most endangered schools. The real estate boom from a federal government that

is as go-go as it is gridlocked is threatening to swallow the Stevens school from its prime site, trust officials warn.

"Certainly we hope Mr. Bush will serve as a real catalyst for education and all the resources needed for it," said Gloria Henderson, the principal at Stevens, which enjoyed a blip of fame a generation ago when Amy Carter attended as part of President Jimmy Carter's unusual attempt to be closer to real-life Washington. "Stevens is the neighborhood school of the White House, and what better place for Mr. Bush to start on his own promise than at Stevens," she said of the city's disastrously frayed school infrastructure. "Mr. Bush's mother visited once, so I expect he will."

But the failure here of noblesse oblige gestures is an old neighborhood story. This season people were shocked when a would-be philanthropist failed in his headlined promise to finance college scholarships for 60 inner-city students. The city rallied to a Capraesque ending when a new donor emerged in time for Christmas.

For Washingtonians east of the river, the capital core with its endless political ballyhoo is a Potemkin village; their expectation level beyond the bubble is decidedly wary. President Clinton, the great neighborhood hope of eight years ago, turned out to have virtually no interaction with the ordinary people. "Clinton proved to be our rich uncle," said Mark Plotkin, a perennial civic goad and journalist for WAMU, a public radio station. "He opened the federal wallet for the city's cause, but I wish he had opened his mouth and his heart as much."

Mr. Plotkin expects far less from President-elect Bush. "Bush will be our one-man depression," he contended.

Accordingly, Mr. Plotkin was up to his usual zealot's mischief this week, hectoring the administration at an 11th-hour press briefing to say whether Mr. Clinton, who grandly endorsed statehood for the district, would leave Mr. Bush, who decidedly does not, a presidential limousine festooned with the city's rebellious new license plate. It complains of "Taxation Without Representation" to underline the fact that residents pay \$2 billion in taxes but have no voting representation in Congress.

To Mr. Plotkin's shock, the administration matched his appetite for mischief and said the plate would be bolted on. He hopes this leaves the incoming Bush team the Scroogelike choice of removing it in favor of the old "Celebrate & Discover" plate that statehood proponents find dispiriting.

So goes the life of symbolism west of the river. Across the Anacostia River, Ms. Schwalb's holiday worry is that the student poet who wrote of political epochs growing wild has been missing her classes at the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop to baby-sit for younger siblings.

"Her mom works the late shift at Popeye's, for minimum wage," Ms. Schwalb said. "So if Mr. Bush is not going to leave any kids behind, as he promised so often in the campaign, he could raise the minimum wage for her mom. And he should see for himself how D.C. schools desperately need repairs."

Every four years, candidates campaign against the Beltway culture as something alien from real life in the America beyond. But there is plenty of real life here, too, and Ms. Schwalb said she would be shocked to see any of the latest victors cross the river to see the prosaic truth.

"The schools need to have some money thrown at them," Ms. Schwalb said. "It's the only way; they're suffering that much."

GRAPHIC: Photo: Gloria Henderson outside Stevens Elementary School in Washington, where she is the principal. (Justin Lane for The New York Times)

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