



Rockland Buzz

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Still Going
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The Old School
Fellowship Education

Metro Show with Phil Groce



This week Phil Groce from Union, a physician with over 50 years of experience in family medicine and geriatrics, joined us on WRFR's Rockland Metro Show. Phil is a regular contributor to The Buzz with his "Down Main Street" interview series, the latest of which is in this issue. We talked, of course, about the covid-19 epidemic, and a variety of other topics too.

Next week we will continue our series of conversations with special guests, on the virus crisis, and whatever moves us.

Please join us next Wednesday from 5 to 6 pm for the Rockland Metro show, on 93.3 fm in Rockland, 99.3 fm in Camden, and online at WRFR.org. And call in to 593-0013 to join the conversation.

Visit WRFR.org for more information.

Down Maine Street with Phil Groce

The Ticket



The opposite of glitz, the United Home Furniture Store looms near the juncture of North Main. Hasn't changed much since it opened 74 years ago, still using a leviathan of a woodstove centrally located, with the nearby rocking chair that Marty Rubenstein especially likes. Other chairs clustered, including a worn low-sitting orange upholstered rocker where his mother was sitting before the ambulance took her to the hospital in 1987.

We sat comfortably at 6-foot social-distancing, both wearing masks and surrounded by new upholstered furniture. Mattresses were layered on the north wall. It didn't take long for the stove to warm the place, even with the auditorium-high ceiling. The business had been shut down with lights out for the last 6 weeks due to the virus amongst us.

I told him that I remember coming in here in the past to buy furniture, and always I saw people seated around the stove, talking. "What with the new loosening up," he said, "you can go out and get a tattoo, but you can't come here and buy furniture."

I asked if he was from here. "Yep, born at the old Knox Hospital in 1947, lost my father when I was 12, his 3rd heart attack when he was 43. He was so young, but then I thought 43 was old. Two older brothers, one of whom (my idol when I was little) died when I was 30. I knew what it felt like to be deserted. My mother, giving up as a housewife, had to take over the business, though she knew little about it. But the last 20 years of her life, we worked it together and she became a good friend. I remember her saying before she died, that it's awful to find out you are going to die, and you really want to live.

"When I was young, I hated coming in here for anything. I thought it was the most boring place in the world." Just then an elderly man walked into the store, the front door being left open, though a sign said 'Closed' on the outside. He had just returned from winter in Florida and was checking-in to talk with Marty. They would talk later.

"At Rockland High, I was still reeling over my father's death, and I guess I was hard to handle. Good at basketball, but voted 'The Biggest Goof-Off' in the annual, but so was Mary Waterman, and she later became the chairman of the school board. Incidentally, my daughter, was the salutatorian of Rockland High that same year. So, I guess we both did okay after all.

"Viet Nam war was going on, and with the draft always present, I entered Maine Maritime. They shaved our heads, and we were told that the only things we could say to the upper classmen were, 'Yes, Sir; No, Sir; No excuse, Sir; or I'll find out, Sir. For me, that lasted about a semester, and I left to joined the Coast Guard. That same day I got my letter from the Army with 'Greetings from the President of the United States.' I served 4 years in the Coast Guard—third class boatswain's mate. We all smoked and drank. That's the way it was in the 70's. Got out of drinking later, and I smoked my last cigarette sitting in that chair you're in, March 23, 1992."

I remembered the wild Thorndike bar in the early 70's on the corner of Tilson and Main, in the basement of the what was then the Thorndike Hotel—loud and raucous, always with many from the Guard celebrating. Had to be ready to duck when something went flying.

"After the Guard, I worked laboring at the cement factory, the water treatment plant, then cooking at the Samoset. In 1977, 3 days after Christmas, I lost my brother. I then decided to come in here. The business was active, and the warehouse full. Now . . . this is all there is: a one-man operation. Back then the rage was Moosehead furniture, which we sold a lot." I nodded. We have one of their wooden rockers at home. "Moosehead didn't last too long," he said, "the same with the shoe manufacturers—cheaper imports.

"Sylvia joined the business to do the office work in 1983. I had divorced with 3 great kids. Sylvia and I are still together, and she does the books. She became close to my mother, too. When I met her, it was like a breath of fresh air, and it still is."

I said to Marty that it seemed to me that this is a business that capitalism forgot. "I like people, and it means more to me to have a conversation that is good for both of us than have a sale. If I can help someone save money, I'll try. I know about furniture, but it is a vehicle for me." I replied that the business is growing old along with him, and it is part of him. The process is more important than making of money. "Yeah, I'm probably the last guy who should be running a business." It is success, uniquely redefined.

"I'll tell you what is important to me" he said. "You remember when President Reagan said that if you are better off now than you were 4 years ago, then you should vote for me. That's how I operate. I look at, say, 4 months ago, or maybe 4 weeks ago, and if I am not better off about myself, then I have to reevaluate and change things. Life is supposed to get better, and it DOES. It helps that I can vividly recall events in my past.

"My daughter, who is a mechanical engineer, once said to me that she did well in school because she got her ticket punched by the way she was raised. That said it for me, because I lost my father, and my mother was overwhelmed with work here. I ended up punching my own ticket."

What a ride!

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Rockland waterfront, north end, May 2020

RANDOM NOTES WHILE SHELTERING IN PLACE

by Phyllis Merriam



Lobstering off the Rockland breakwater, May 2020

Buzz Editorial

One of the saddest things about our bout with the new coronavirus is that our partisan divisions have infected what should be a healthy discussion about how best to cope. It is inevitable, and necessary, that we have different ideas, different priorities, different fears and hopes. It is through communicating with each other, through sharing our perspectives, that we can make good decisions as a community. To succeed, we must listen to each other.

The virus crisis is reminding us that a good balance between freedom and order is essential for our pursuit of happiness. It is not a question, though, of one or the other. It is possible to have both, possible to have a high level of freedom and a high level of order. And it is possible to have neither freedom nor order. Finding the proper "balance" is not so much about trade-offs, as about finding ways that freedom and order can coexist.

There is a legitimate debate right now about the long-term solution to the crisis. To what extent should we "lock-down" and wait for technology to find a vaccine or a cure? To what extent should we allow a reasonably controlled spread of the virus to build the "herd" immunity that could protect the whole community?

To some extent this is an individual choice. Those most at risk, elderly people and those who have serious health issues, clearly will want to isolate themselves to the maximum possible, and the rest of us should respect that, and help. They will ultimately be protected either by a vaccine or by herd immunity. The rest of us have a more difficult choice to make. We need to respect each other's reasoning, and each other's choices.

To some extent, however, this is a community choice. What rules to make? Deciding this should not be a partisan battle, but a reasoned and respectful discussion.

We have been sheltering-in-place now for 56 days. Frequent hand washing and disinfecting is turning me into someone with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Our mid-coast spring is as hesitant as a shy teenager. Sometimes she gives us the cold shoulder. Other times she smiles warmly and then turns away and retreats. Forsythias bloom. Old lilacs have buds. The huge rhododendron waits until June. Hydrangeas will have their late summer turn. Dandelions are early and as bold as ever. Since they are food for fragile bees fighting their own virus, I leave them alone. Starlings on telephone lines. If I could read music there would be a song. Overheard between two laughing friends at the drugstore: "Hey! Are you here to get your Clorox Bleach injection?" People are reporting vivid dreams during these sheltering-in-place times. My husband has been having very colorful dreams. I hardly remember mine. Oddly, he and I both had similar dreams about eating steak – something we rarely (not to make a pun) eat. In his dream, he had invited friends to join us for a steak dinner. He searched in vain for steaks in supermarkets, only to discover stores were not allowed to sell steaks on Sundays. His VA nutritionist strongly recommends a plant-based diet. Dreams about steak will likely increase.

Nothing has so starkly illuminated class and political divides, as COVID-19. Those with second homes flee to our mid-coast and don't routinely self-quarantine. Area food pantries are running short. The virus doesn't discriminate between Medicaid and private pay nursing home residents.

Recommendations about re-openings of some businesses make me feel conflicted. I know people desperately need to return to employment. Maine is forecast to have one of the nation's largest financial crises. Our mid-coast is financially imploding.

There remain people in our mid-coast who neither wear protective face coverings nor keep their distance. The vital South End Grocery requires shoppers to wear face coverings while Hannaford does not. Both do well with personal distancing.

Fearful Mainers bearing guns and no masks circle the Blaine House verbally threatening Governor Mills. Anger, fear and bravado appear to be their means of trying to cope. Maine's open carry laws make me, a former NRA member in my youth, very anxious. For some, sacrifice for the greater good of the community seems to be an alien obligation.

COVID-19 CATCH 22: In order to know how many cases exist Maine (and all states) needs to have enough tests and contact tracing. There isn't enough of either. Scientists predict a September rebound with a second dangerous winter. No one may recognize a post-COVID-19 mid-coast Maine.

Our ladybug "pet" has disappeared for days. I've looked everywhere in the house for her. Maybe she flew outside when a door was open to transfer groceries? Maybe she's a metaphor for lockdowns being lifted? It seems silly but I miss her small polka-dot beauty and hope she's safe in a wider world.

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