



# The View From Right Field

By Rick Ohler

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**T**here was a lot of rubbernecking last Sunday about 11 a.m. where Routes 78 and 16 North say goodbye to Route 20A West as they pass in front of Schmalz’s Grove where a dozen or so folks had assembled, obviously for some sort of event. Don’t feel bad if you’re wondering where in the heck Schmalz’s Grove is; it remains a well-kept secret to many locals. Nicknamed by Chris Norton of the Knox Road Nortons, it’s the pocket park at the west end of town opposite Frantz Furniture and just north of Shore’s Circle Inn; I mean, across from Dollar General and adjacent to the Kwik Fill gas station and McDonald’s. Times have changed, haven’t they?

Motorists passing by that morning must have nearly wrenched a neck vertebra as they struggled to figure what such a rare gathering in the little-used pocket park could possibly mean. They could see what a grand time we were having, and I’m wondering if they were jealous that they hadn’t been invited.

They could have been there, if only they'd submitted an entry to the 2nd Annual EA's Grandest Dandelion Contest. They might even have won a bottle of the coveted Lion's Pride Dandelion Wine, 2020 edition, from Woodside Vintners.

The Sunday morning convocation by our traffic circle (DO NOT call it a roundabout, no matter what the NYSDOT says) was a reception for the winners of this year's contest. We had promised winners in two categories: Grandest Single Dandelion Plant and Grandest Multi-flower Dandelion Display in a Lawn. But when the photo entries arrived—16 of them—they were all wonderful. Widespread panic ensued among the judges, and we retreated into a secret conclave. When the white smoke rose from the chimney, we had five winners, and even five seemed too few for the quality of the entries. I wheedled an extra bottle of the Pride from the vintner and found a couple from last year that, miraculously, had not been cracked; five it would be.

With a nod to pomp and circumstance, our panel of judges—Nancy Johnson, Ellen Neumaier, Pete Ryan and your intrepid correspondent from Right Field—greeted the winners at Schmalz's. Debby Sullivan's Multi-flower Dandelion Display in a Lawn award for her carpet of yellow on Blakeley Road was accepted by her husband Pat, who read a prepared statement from his wife. "I'm accepting *in absentia*," he read, then added, "I thought she was in Colden." Four entrants shared the single dandelion award. Greg Engle, resplendent in his family-heirloom lederhosen (to the amusement of his wife and daughter), accepted his Grandest Single Dandelion Plant-Height Division for the photo of a 19-inch-tall beauty, verified with a tape measure. Joe McCann, absent through no fault of his own, won Grandest Single Dandelion Plant-Breadth Division for his sprawling, purple-stemmed behemoth. Rebecca Murray's photo, "A Study in

Yellow,” was a masterpiece of composition—a yellow dandelion, two yellow tulips and a yellow lab named Roxy, who accompanied her to the ceremony. She was awarded the Grandest Single Dandelion Plant—Flora cum Fauna Division.

Best in Show belonged to young Conlee Brewer, son of Jeremy and Jessica, whose photo of a young dandelion in full fettle (RIP Snake) with an elderly flowerhead of feathery seeds about to be blown to the four corners in the background, won him the Grandest Single Dandelion Plant-the Great Mandala Division. Conlee told us he loved the “jaggedy-edged flowers” and had been taking many dandelion photos for the contest. He decided this one would be the best. He was right. He’s only six and in elementary school, though, so dandelion wine is not an appropriate prize. Not to worry; Conlee’s dad offered to buy the wine from him for twenty bucks, to which Conlee replied, “I’ll ask Nana; maybe she can do better than that.” A bright future ahead for the lad. (Note: the winning photos are available on my Instagram page.)

Hard as it may be to believe, there was a purpose to our folderol at Schmalz’s. We were making a point, or trying to. As was expressed in a ceremonial limerick that concluded our ceremony:

There’s a plant that lawn owners keep damnifyin’,  
And onto which they are pesticides applyin’.  
They’re quick to defoliate;  
When better they should celebrate  
The indispensable, the yellow-maned dandelion.

In a gentle way, with good humor, without malice—no bed-sheet-sized flags flying from the backs of unmuffled trucks, no my-way-or-the-highway yards signs—we were suggesting that lawn owners let their dandelions flourish, especially given all the

benefits they bring to the natural world—nectar for pollinators, soil conditioning capabilities, medicinal qualities, raw materials for winemakers.

Something else, however, was awakening at Schmalz's Grove last Sunday. For the first time in a year, I felt as if I was back home, in my element. I was having fun with people in my hometown, with friends, for sure, but with complete strangers, as well.

As much as I loved the quiet, pandemic time at Right Field World Headquarters with my sweetheart, and as much as that quiet will remain as part of our days, I acknowledge the shortcomings of those 14 months. We townies had been inside, apart, encountering each other on the phone or by text, online, in a Zoom room, or worse, through (anti)social media, where we leave a vapor trail of our comments and posts, tempting us to make oversimplified, incomplete, one-dimensional judgments about each other. It flew in the face of my hopelessly naive, Pollyanna notion that we like each other better face to face than we do on screen. Our celebration at Schmalz's Grove—15 to 20 minutes long, at most—reaffirmed that notion.

I know, I know; we aren't out of the woods, yet. Perhaps even this Covid reprieve will be short-lived. And it will be a while before I go anywhere without having a face mask in my back pocket to use whenever the situation calls for it. Certainly I respect those who continue to mask up and ask me to do the same, while I try to understand and respect those who eschew the vaccine.

But it's a beginning. I stood, last Saturday, however briefly, at the brass rail at the Right Field Satellite Office, southwest corner of Oakwood and Elm, for the first time since March 16, 2020. I was delighted that they not only remembered my name but what I liked in my pint glass, as well. I attended, again briefly, but in

person, an 80th birthday party for my friend and local legend, Walt Lyons. I ran into David Nojaim, troubadour extraordinaire, who was bubbling over with ideas for live music this summer. At home, the birds sang while they built nests in our trees, the vegetable seeds poked their cotyledons out of the soil, the deer munched the ground cover as we sauntered by and the dandelions, well, they played a symphony of yellow across the yard.