The View From Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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After the recent induction of Art Aungst '70, Ellen Kitson Bennett '75, Joe Lamond '79, Will Medizabal '01 and Sarah Markle '06 into the East Aurora High School Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame, some familiar sentiments surfaced. Even while the inductees were enjoying their deserved moment in the spotlight, a discussion arose around the value of and, indeed, the appropriateness of halls of fame, whether the halls are esteemed and historic bastions like the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown or a set of plaques along a hallway like the high school hall of fame. Is it right to single out members of a certain subset and leave others out, some people argue? Do we make too much fuss about those we honor, without understanding the breadth of their experience entirely? Does induction of a small cohort diminish the accomplishments of the vast majority of people who will never make it to Cooperstown or Canton or the hallway of the local high school? Are awards of any type too subjective to be of any use? Should we just let AI decide? Or abandon the practice altogether?

As a lifetime (human, not AI) resident of the Greater East Aurora area, I have been asked to be part of several selection committees: the aforementioned hall at the high school and one at the Boys and Girls Club of East Aurora, the Greater East Aurora Music Hall of Fame at the West Falls Center for the Arts, the Stott Award at Roycroft, not technically a hall of fame, but one that honors locals whose efforts in the arts have a community benefit. Once upon a time, I was on the high school's athletic hall of fame selection committee. And while I

acknowledge that halls of fame have shortcomings, I think they serve helpful, necessary roles in a community.

For one thing, halls of fame inductions or distinctions of any kind get people talking, maybe gently arguing. The comment made in response to a committee's choice of inductee, "Well, what about (fill in the blank)? He/she/they should be in that hall," inspires a discussion about the relative merits of all kinds of good folks doing cool stuff. Who knew? I often ask, when learning of the accomplishments of a neighbor I might have thought I knew. We are the better for knowing these things. As a selection committee member, I hope that anyone championing a potential candidate will turn that hope into a nomination that we can mull over next time. For instance, nomination applications for the high school's Distinguished Alumni Hall of Fame are readily available at eastauroraef.org, the website of the East Aurora Educational Foundation, which sponsors the hall as part of its continuing support of the schools, students and staff in the district.

For another, we hear the stories that help put our lives in perspective.

On April 25, we heard about five unique paths from five distinguished alumni.

As long as I have known hall of fame designee Arty Aungst, I had never heard him explain how he came to settle on education and coaching swimming as paths that have dominated his adult life until that Friday morning.

"It was one summer when I was home from college," he began, "and Walt Lyons [teacher and coach] asked if I wanted to lifeguard at the Community Pool. That had to be an improvement over my current job of breaking up metal casting with a sledge hammer, so I agreed. How great would this be, sitting in the sun, getting a good tan, I thought? Well. The first day, I walked in to find six or seven crying five-year-olds that I was supposed to teach to swim. Hey, I was going to be a lawyer; I wasn't ready for that. But I quickly learned the power of being able to take those crying kids and get them to move comfortably in the water. By the end of the week, we were going off the diving board. They had overcome their fear, and I changed my major to education as soon as I returned to school."

Art went on to teach special ed and coach girls and boys swimming for several decades at Orchard Park High School, earning all kinds of accolades and sending hundreds of kids on their way into successful adulthoods. Many are still in his life today.

Ellen Kitson Bennett said, “This award, so unexpected, gave me the opportunity to reflect on growing up on Fillmore Avenue, in the village with generations of ancestors, great-grandparents and before. And the foundation that I relied upon in the community and in East Aurora Schools.” It was a foundation she would need when she lost her daughter, Katie, to anorexia in 2013. After that tragedy, she summoned the fortitude to become an expert in the disease, “that affects so many young people, many more than you realize.” She established KMB for Answers, a non-profit that educates educators and mental health professionals about anorexia and connects those suffering or at risk with resources.

Joe Lamond, a Californian for over 40 years, said, “East Aurora is an amazing place, and has remained that way despite all the threats.” He stressed to students that, “Rarely is your path to success a straight line. I had a passion for music, thought all I wanted was to be a rock and roll drummer, that’s it. But as I pursued that dream in San Francisco, I began to see that I fit into different aspects of music, the managing and business end.” Lamond began working for the National Association of Music Merchants, the largest music trade organization in the world. He rose to CEO and directed NAMM into research and lobbying efforts on behalf of music and art education in public schools. “I was wary of having a Plan B, worried that it would be too easy to abandon Plan A. I just let Plan A evolve into a career that fulfilled my dreams.”

Sarah Markle, didn’t have a Plan B, either. It was music all the way and she has certainly flourished, now playing cello with the Charlotte Symphony. She says that she spent most of her time in the orchestra room at the high school, at my instrument, preparing for my college audition. I remember feeling like I didn't really want to be seen very much in school, which is ironic, for someone who aspired to be a performer. I remember feeling pretty content to just not stand up, to not draw too much attention to myself. I ran the risk of being a total hermit, and so I feel grateful to East Aurora High School for keeping me well-rounded. The more I live out my career as a professional musician, which is an amazing world, the more I appreciate having a well-rounded view of the world.

Frederico “Will” Medizabal knew early on that a military career would suit him and it has, witnessed by his current rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Marines. “From my experiences at East Aurora High School, I can retrace my experiences to see where my discipline came from, especially from my lacrosse coach, Coach Pat Lally. These 24 years in the Marines have given me and my family amazing adventures, endless opportunities, and challenges. I’m proud to continue my career, serving young Marines and sailors.”

I quoted the great American linguist and philosopher, Yogi Berra, in introducing Art Aungst. At a celebration of Yogi’s baseball career, he said, “I’d like to thank everyone who made this day necessary.” Me, too.