

GUEST COLUMN

An ode to the Upper Darby School District community

By Joseph Batory
Times Guest Columnist

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach

When feeling out of sight for the ends of Being an ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of every day's most quiet needs, by sun and candlelight.

The borrowed words above echo in my brain whenever I reflect upon my 15 years as superintendent of schools in the Upper Darby School District. Those words are from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who wrote those moving lines to express her affection and caring and concern for a loved one. Appropriately, her words are a superb expression of the love that I will always have for the school community that was my wonderful workplace and home for so many years.

In 1984, when I was named the superintendent of schools in Upper Darby, two incidents sent chills down my spine. The first episode was a telephone call from a superintendent in a nearby affluent, homogeneous school district. He wanted to wish me well, but he issued an ominous prediction. "The Upper Darby School Dis-

trict community is changing and not for the better," the superintendent pontificated. "People have begun to flee the city of Philadelphia and your school system is going to end up with a great many of those inner-city kids. Immigrants are also flooding in. That adds up to turbulence. If I were you, I would make a three-year plan to get out. Upper Darby can be a great steppingstone to a superintendent's job somewhere else where you can succeed and live happily ever after."

I politely thanked my colleague for his well wishes but what I really wanted to tell him would make a sailor blush. And then a local realtor added even more elitist icing to the cake. My wife, Joan, and I were looking to move into the Upper Darby community. And this real estate agent spent most of his time predicting the demise of the Upper Darby school community via its deteriorating demographics. He kept urging us to look for a home in a more upscale community. I short-circuited! My fuses blew! And when I threatened to go to his bosses and tell them that they had employed a moron to sell houses, the agent finally took his foot out of his mouth and did what he was supposed to do. Shortly thereafter, Joan and I purchased a house inside the school district in Drexel

Hill.

During the next 15 years the Upper Darby community did in fact change. Communities with increasing socioeconomic, racial and ethnic diversity always have been and continue to be full of challenges. But Upper Darby has not imploded. Far from it, the Upper Darby School District, its area political leaders in the communities, its churches, and its general populace have all worked to assimilate many newcomers and celebrate cultural, racial and ethnic mixtures as a strength, not a weakness. Meanwhile, the Upper Darby School District has won many outside awards for its educational innovations, its "breaking-the-mold" curriculum and instruction, its student services and its community outreach.

And so, with deepest respect for the poetess Browning, I sincerely apologize for this humble improvisation of her love poem by this pretender poet:

How do I love you, Upper Darby school community? Let me count the ways:

I love you for not being a white-bread-community. Your diversity your unpretentious non-materialistic nature, your solid values, and your hard-working and caring citizenry have always given me inspiration and determination.

I love you for your trust in



DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA FILE PHOTO

Upper Darby High School.

sending me thousands of your children. I tried to prioritize the best for each of them and inspire those educators who have worked for me to do the same.

I love you for providing me with more than 40 decent, giving and dedicated school board members over the course of 15 years who put politics aside and challenged and inspired me and joined me in the quest for education at its best.

I love you for your unwavering support of Upper Darby's teachers and principals and other staff in the education of your children.

I love you for the acceptance and affection you gave my wife and me as residents of the community. The hundreds of civic and school events we attended and were a part of will always be treasured memories for us.

I love you for your network of

community services, from the Delaware County Hospital to the Community Y to the senior citizen centers, to the churches and restaurants and banks and retail stores where I spent so much time checking your pulse.

I love you for the difficult real estate tax-support you had to provide our schools when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania abandoned its Constitutional commitment to fund "thorough and efficient" schools statewide.

I love you for the police and fire department personnel who were by my side in so many times of need.

And I love you because so many academic and personal miracles were created for young people because of our spirit of togetherness.

Dearest Upper Darby ... I love you freely as you strive for right; I love you purely, as you receive this praise; I love you with a former school superintendent's unwavering faith and prayers with all my breadth, smiles and tears for all of my life.

Joseph Batory is the former superintendent of schools in Upper Darby. This is adapted with permission from his third book, "Joey Lets It All Hang Out," published by Rowman and Littlefield.