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Joel Cryer's photo appeared there, too. Joel is described on page 4 here.

2001: One cruel year and two caring gentlemen

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T.S. Eliot got it wrong. April is not the cruelest month. All months are equally cruel. The year 2001 brought this truth home to those of us Americans who have been privileged to view the world from a comfortable distance with our eyes wide shut. It remains to be seen what we shall do with our new understanding. The smart money is betting pessimistic.

“Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected.” This observation by Paul Fussell, author of “The Great War” and “Modern Memory and Wartime,” is true even of the open-ended and still formally undeclared war against terrorism that most of us are experiencing voyeuristically on television. American economic and technological power is so overwhelming that our government leaders have been able to bring major destructive force to bear against our “enemy” in ways that have limited our human cost to a list of names that can almost fit into a Mike Ramirez political cartoon frame. But Master Sgt. Davis, Sgt. 1st Class Petithory, Staff Sgt. Prosser and Agent Johnny Spann have given their lives for us in a god-forsaken region fighting against those who invoke god to commit mass murder.

Information about the war is being controlled in ways that might lend a dubious plausibility to “enemy” skepticism about the authenticity of the bin Laden “home video.” People with any historical perspective know better. Osama bin Laden somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan shares a good laugh about mass murder with a sycophantic group of al Qaeda cronies. Sixty years ago, Adolf Hitler held forth with the same monstrous banality in the mountains of Obersalzberg, as Nazi leaders orchestrated the most extreme forms of evil the world has ever seen. Evil minds think alike.

Values from the Front Page

Two recent front-page stories in the Austin American-Statesman revealed how we long to get back to basic values, no matter how skewed. First Mack Brown, head coach of the NFL minor-league franchise associated with the University of Texas at Austin, chose Major Applewhite over Chris Simms as starting quarterback in Friday night's Culligan Holiday Bowl. Never mind the economic impact and moral implications of Enron's implosion, the escalation of deadly terrorism in Israel and the curtailment of American civil liberties – we wanted the important news.

Before the season started, in the glossy 568-page "Texas 2001" football media guide, Applewhite declared that his favorite thing about UT football is "the loyal fans." Simm's singled out "the crazy fans." By season's end, each was right on target about the fickle nature of sports popularity. Longhorn players in "Texas 2001" listed under the category last or best book read titles such as "Green Eggs and Ham" and "Old Yeller." Applewhite, however, had read Jim Thompson's noir classic "The Killer Inside Me," an inside-the-mind portrait of psychopathic evil in a small Texas town. Let's hope he gave his used copy to Simms. He'll need it next year.

This season had a "can-you-top-this" quality. Notre Dame's hallowed program disposed of its new coach for long having fabricated on his resume an entire college football career and a graduate degree. Even the distant South China Morning Post was appalled, running the headline "George O'Liary – A Coach Well Qualified for Hall of Shame." But the Lone Star State had the best punch line, as Gov. Rick Perry's chief of staff and fellow Aggie Mike McKinney was literally punched out after a game in Lubbock – by an Aggie student no less. Washington Post sportswriter Tom Boswell wrote many years ago about how life resembled the World Series. This still holds true. Professional sports like big-time college football do mirror real life, and that tells us that we are in serious trouble.

The second front-page story informed us that the extensive police files about UT Tower mass murderer Charles Whitman are soon to be available to the public. As a harbinger of holiday cheer, we were treated to full excerpts from his diaries and murder notes. It is an absurdly American irony that any of us can gain detailed Jim Thompson-like information about Whitman's deranged motives, while expert presidential historians

cannot study the public papers of the 40th president of the United States. All it takes to subvert democratic access to information is a 43rd president with chutzpah.

Other stories show how fickle news coverage is. Chandra Levy disappeared on the last day of the cruelest month, and U.S. Rep. Gary Condit appeared along with her parents on news broadcasts and talk shows into early September. Her parents have known now eight cruel months, and we may wonder whether they think the circuslike media exploitation of the summer or our abrupt amnesia in the fall is more reprehensible.

It would be too depressing to catalogue other cruel tragedies and perversions of value in 2001. I do hope, however, that someone with real human sympathy who has read and understood Euripides' "Medea" writes the story of infanticide and Andrea Yates, the Houston mother of five, who for years lived mutely and obediently with her husband and children as "a real trooper," part of that time in a converted school bus with less than 60 square feet of space per person.

What brings me some seasonal cheer are the people who work hard and without acclaim doing real good for others on a daily basis. It has been my privilege to get to know two such Austinites and native Texans, Billy Harden and Joel D. Cryer. Both men have had a lifelong passion for education and have devoted themselves to educating those in our society who otherwise would lack the basic social skills and intellectual tools to build decent lives for themselves and others.

Good works

Harden, who was born in 1953 in East Austin and still lives there, proudly declares that he missed only three days of his public school education at Sims Elementary, Allan Middle School and Johnston High School. He attributes his can-do spirit to his father, a small-business man and his mother, Ada Harden, who worked as a domestic servant. Both parents made sure he felt he could "plow new ground." Before graduating from Huston-Tillotson College in the mid-1970s, he attended UT Austin for two years when there were about 300 minority students out of 25,000. He understood then that some minority students were put at a disadvantage by cultural norms that left them without the resource skills to navigate vast impersonal educational seas.

Harden, whose career intersected with Cryer's in the early days of Extend-A-Care For Kids, serves as youth choir director at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church. Since the mid-90s he has worked at the AISD Alternative Learning Center at 900 Neal St.

Billy agrees that my first impression of the center, formed when I went to teach his class, was correct. Stand out in front of the locked doors of the center, gaze north and westward across Interstate 35, and you will see low on the horizon the uppermost portions of the UT Tower and the Royal-Memorial Stadium. From Neal St., UT-Austin might as well be on the moon. Harden and his veteran teacher colleagues work like mission control in Houston to instill in their students self-discipline, work ethics and realistic hope that they can make it to the moon and beyond – or, like himself, back.

Joel Cryer was born in 1946 and grew up in Hamshire in East Texas. He now lives in Hyde Park and is head of two enterprises, the Southwest Center for Experiential Learning and The Corporate Challenge. His work has recently taken him to China, Siberia and Arkansas to implement experiential learning methods. He first bought into “practical learning” when he worked summer jobs “puddling the rice fields” and full-time laborers kindly taught him how to use his back and pace himself. From the flat lands of East Texas, Cryer literally jumped at the chance to train for air rescue with the Army Airborne, the U.S. Naval Diving School and the U.S. Air Force Survival School. What most attracted him was the motto, “These Things We Do So That Others May Live.” He followed that motto in Vietnam and still follows it.

Like Billy Harden, Cryer works to give disadvantaged “students,” rich and poor, tools of self-accomplishment and self-analysis that they otherwise might never acquire. Cryer's fundamental belief is that good teaching requires the modeling of values. Of his work in state prisons, he explains that for some prisoners successfully completing a challenge course may be the first positive accomplishment in their lives.

Life is cruel and hard for many human beings, but people such as Billy Harden and Joel Cryer make it better in 2001 and any year.

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