



yikes!

THE WIT AND WISDOM OF

by **Ron Eid** photography by **Jeffrey Hammond**



Bloomington's Pulitzer Prize— Winning Editorial Cartoonist

JOEL PETT

Watching 52-year-old Joel Pett swim in his favorite quarry west of town, it's easy to imagine him here at 19, jumping off a ledge to catch a Frisbee. His hair may be grayer, and there's less of it now, but he still has the wiry body of a teenager. And while the editorial cartoonist, a 2000 Pulitzer Prize winner, is known for the biting commentary of his syndicated political cartoons, out here at the quarry he's playful.

Pett has stopped for a swim on one of several yearly trips to his native Bloomington to visit friends. Climbing out of the water refreshed, he recalls the good times of the late 1970's and early '80s. "I came to this quarry every day, all summer long, for eight years. Back then, most of the fun was going on without clothes." So, when he and his friends frolicked here, they had two concerns when they jumped into the water: "Catching the Frisbee and landing just right."

He gazes at the summer sky and rhapsodizes about the mud-and-lichen nest of a cliff swallow on the quarry wall. "Birds are unbelievable. They have no tools. What kind of house could you build with materials found nearby, using only your mouth?"

He's relaxed, he's nostalgic, he's diverted by the nesting birds. So it's surprising when he confides, "I'm infuriated . . . at everything."

His work is his therapy

Pett gives vent to his anger through his work. Drawing political cartoons, he says, "is the only therapeutic way to shed my grief, anger, and complete disbelief at humankind's pathetic inability to solve even the most basic problems." If the public perceives editorial cartoonists as cut-ups, the truth, he says, is that "most of us in this business are filled with anger and rage."

Why?

"Everything they taught us turns out to be a lie." His list starts with Santa Claus and extends to the law of supply and demand. "The free market isn't driven by consumer demand. It's all marketing. Here's my example: Nobody demanded Pringles. We were perfectly happy eating chips out of a bag."

It's not total equality he craves, just "some level of fairness. I'm happy that whoever invented the Frisbee got really rich. I don't have any problem with disparities of wealth. But the minimums are so pathetic. You've got babies dying for lack of a dime's worth of food or

Pett's targets include the greedy, the shortsighted, the corrupt, and "anyone who should know better."

medicine while we blow untold trillions on the arms machine. It's astonishing. I don't know what you do about it, but what I chose to do was yell."

Pett "yells" by drawing six editorial cartoons a week, one for USA Today on Mondays and five for the Lexington, Kentucky *Herald-Leader* (on whose editorial board he sits). He also writes a column for *The Los Angeles Times*, does frequent public speaking engagements, is syndicated to newspapers around the nation, and has published five books. His cartoons appear regularly in the *Herald-Times* and in the Phi Delta Kappa education journal.

He appreciates that *The Herald-Leader* gives him free rein regarding subject matter. "If I decide to go on some jag and draw about Darfur for three days in a row, that's cool with them. There's nobody saying, 'This isn't relevant to the people of central Kentucky,' which is what some jackass editors might say."

Fairness and the creative process

Being an editorial cartoonist obliges you to read "all the time," Pett says. He scours newspapers, websites, blogs, and special-interest literature. To create a cartoon, he makes a list of topics, and then looks for random associations among them. For example, he might combine "Bin Laden's videotapes" with "Podcasting," and write, "Hey progress! Now you can get bin Laden on Podcast."

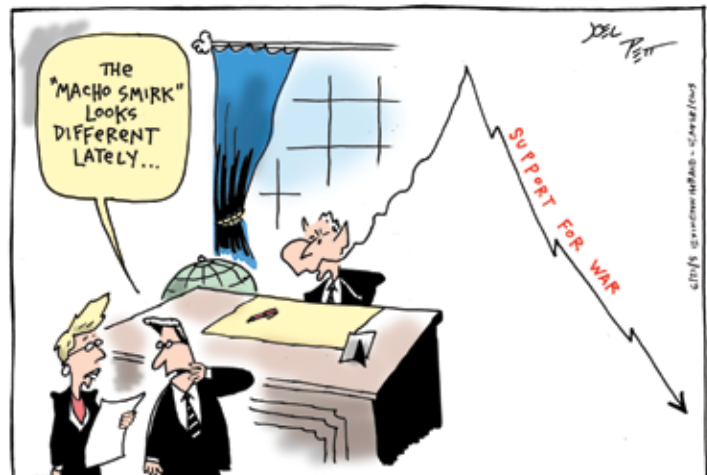
The hard part is translating the idea into a picture. "I'm not the most facile of artists," Pett admits. "The best thing I ever learned was to quit trying to do stuff I'm not good at. I'll never be able to draw light filtering through trees. What I'm good at is the smart-ass, talking-head stuff—like 'Garfield' or 'Cathy' in a political form."

Pett is known for his razor-sharp commentary on social issues. He generally targets whoever is in power, because whoever holds power, he says, tends to abuse it. "The unfortunate thing about my line of work is that the worse the leadership, the riper your subject matter. Though it's not just the leadership. I'm aghast at the 'followership.'" On that list he includes the greedy, the shortsighted, the corrupt, and "anyone who should know better."

Pett acknowledges that editorial cartooning is not always fair to its targets. "It's not a medium that people expect to be fair. It doesn't work very well when it is. It's like a little play. You get to pick the characters, the wardrobe, the setting—everything. And none of it is fair. Malicious intent, the legal determining factor in most libel cases, is the single best quality for us. You're under an obligation to have some sense of fairness as you go about deciding what's right or wrong. But once you've zeroed in on your target, you have wide latitude."

Good times and bad at IU

Pett wasn't always political. Born in Bloomington, he was six when his family moved to Nigeria where his father, Dennis Pett, became a visiting professor.



"The early '60s post-colonial period was a nice time to live in West Africa," he says. "Nigeria was a happier place then. There was a lot of poverty but also a lot of hope. Their destiny was in their own hands."

Although he acknowledges that Bloomington was "a nice place to grow up," he had trouble integrating when he moved back and attended University High School. "I was shell-



The young Mr. Pett in 6th grade at Rogers School.

shocked after living in Africa. All the American kids were big and loud. I had a bit of a chip on my shoulder and a damn sharp tongue.”

Around this time he discovered the cartoons of the legendary Herb Block (known as “Herblock”) of *The Washington Post* and Hugh Haynie of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. “I fell in love with political cartooning. Besides music, it was the only thing that spoke to me.”

As a student at IU, however, he was driven more by anger than by art. He never had a drawing lesson and took only one art class. “I tended to choose my classes by how many women I thought would be in them. That method didn’t work out, but I kept trying.”



(Pett is now happily married to wife Lucy, an attorney in Lexington.)

Pett practiced drawing by copying his favorite cartoons from newspapers. And during his sophomore year, he steeled his courage and asked the student editor of the *Indiana Daily Student* if he could draw editorial cartoons for the newspaper.

“The guy acted like a damn editor—a guy with a tie, you know. He looked at me and said, ‘We’ve got a cartoonist, but thanks.’ He didn’t even look at my stuff. I was brokenhearted.”

Pett eventually dropped out of college. But he hung around campus for several more years, begging freelance assignments from various university departments. His work also began appearing in the old *Bloomington Herald-Telephone*, where, in addition to editorial cartoons, he illustrated what he describes as “the little goofball story of the day.”

But most of his time was spent enjoying Bloomington—swimming at the quarry, playing basketball at the HPER Building, or sneaking onto the golf course (“We’d walk through the woods and start on the second hole.”). He didn’t need much money.



“I was such a weirdo that few women would go out with me, so I didn’t even need money for dating. Long beard, never shaved. I thought deodorant was a capitalist plot.”

In the early ’80s, Pett heard that the newspaper in Lexington might hire an editorial cartoonist, so he applied. “I put on my freaky gray suit and tie. I had no idea how to interview. I drove down there uninvited.” He met with the editor, but it took two years for the newspaper to create the position and hire the persistent young man from Bloomington.

Early in his career he visited *The Washington Post* and met Herb Block, his longtime inspiration. “He was a god,” Pett says. “Not just in political cartooning but in Washington politics. And he was the nicest guy in the world.”

“I tended to choose my classes [at IU] by how many women I thought would be in them. That method didn’t work out, but I kept trying.”

He was real encouraging to me.”

On the same visit, he had a different reception from the paper’s art director — “a stuffy little jerk, way too tightly wound,” Pett remembers. “He took my stuff...looked at it, looked at me, and said, ‘You know, there’s only one Herb Block. But there are a lot of you. To be honest I think you should go back to Iowa and find a niche there that works for you.’”

Once again, Pett was undeterred. What

separates people who succeed from people who don't, he says, "is steadfastness and determination. Having the attitude that you will not be denied is more important than talent, brains, or education."

The Pulitzer Prize brings vindication

It disappoints him that editorial cartoons don't have more impact. "When you're twenty, you think, 'Ooh, this kind of work inspires change' so I thought I'd be part of the solution. But I don't think that any more. My work is mainly just therapy for me. I don't think all the work of all the cartoonists in the world combined has any effect." But the situation isn't entirely bleak. "I'll tell you what editorial cartoonists do, for sure. We encourage.

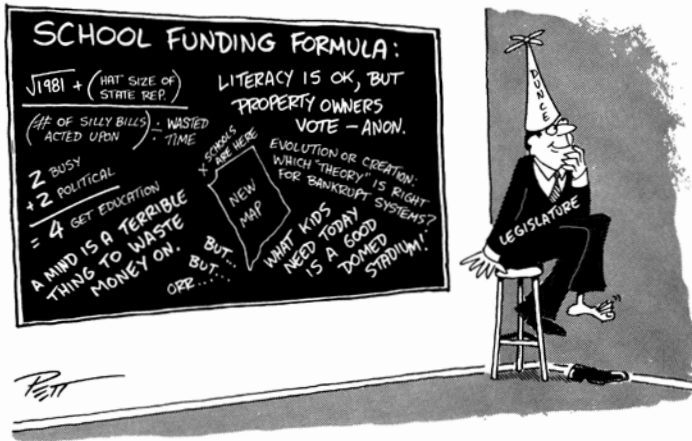
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A nighttime visit to campus

Old wounds heal slowly. To this day he holds a grudge against the student newspaper. So one might wonder why—after a day at the quarry and a relaxing dinner downtown with friends—he pays a nighttime visit to the IU campus.

Walking along a dark, wooded path in Dunn's Woods, he stops and looks down at a limestone bench. It is dedicated to Dr. Dennis Pett, former professor of education and onetime chairman of Instructional Systems Technology.

"My dad passed away about three years ago," he says. "His ex-students anted up for this memorial bench. We had a little ceremony, spread some of his ashes, and jawed about him. It was cool. I always come here when I'm in town." ✨



How little times have changed. An early Pett cartoon from 1982.

There are people on the front lines of all the struggles—social workers, legal-aid lawyers, cops, healthcare workers, people who deal with bad laws. We encourage them."

And certainly winning the Pulitzer Prize offered validation for his work.

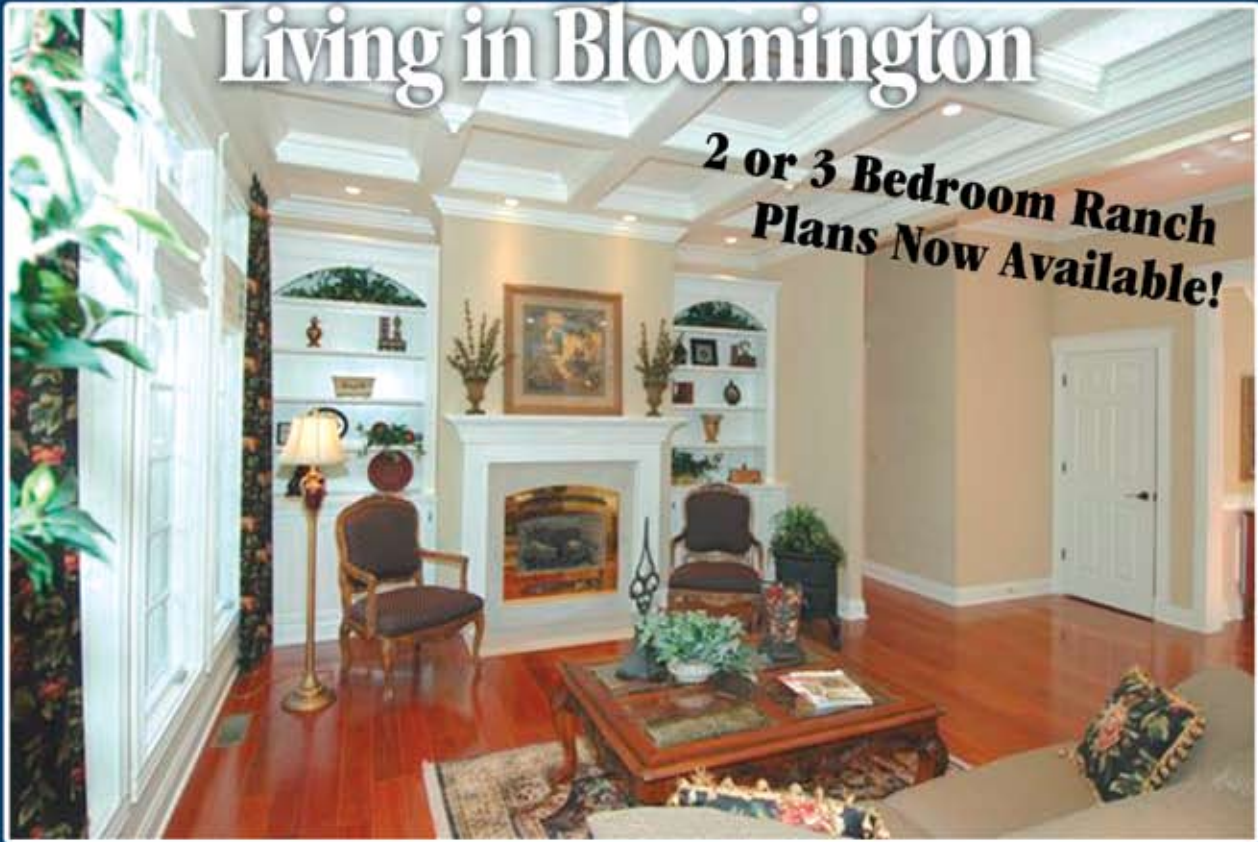
"It's a great honor," he admits, but with reservation. "It becomes part of your name. But is the process fair? Of course not! It's like the Oscar. There's no best picture and no best cartoonist. If you win, you're just lucky."

Still, winning the Pulitzer was a personal victory. Pett heard two voices—of the student editor at the *IDS* and the art director at *The Washington Post*—and felt vindicated for his perseverance.



A day in the working life of Joel Pett.

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