The Roanoke Times

MAY 27, 2019

**Shout-out to the pro-vaccine parents**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

This column isn’t for the 10% of families who won’t vaccinate their children against preventable diseases. It’s for the 90% who do. You did good.

You made a clear-eyed, commonsense decision based on science and evidence. You didn’t give in to paranoia, fear or misinformation. You might have doubted your choice for a moment, especially when your baby cried after being stuck with a sharp needle and injected with small amounts of the disease the shot is designed to prevent. But you stuck with the program, so to speak, and kept returning to the pediatrician for more inoculations.

You heard the stories about how climbing autism rates have been blamed on vaccines, and then listened to actual doctors call nonsense on such rubbish. Like me a decade ago, you took a deep breath, followed your doctor’s advice and got your child vaccinated.

And now, your children will never have the measles, unlike the hundreds of children this year who contracted this mostly preventable disease because their families would not allow them to be inoculated.

Your children will never be paralyzed by polio, which happened to members of my family back before approval of Jonas Salk’s world-changing polio vaccine in 1955. Your children will never have diphtheria, the mumps, chicken pox or whooping cough, sicknesses that sound like they belong in a Charles Dickens novel and not in 21st-century newspaper stories.

If your daughter receives the human papillomavirus vaccine, she will most likely never get cervical cancer when she is an adult.

You have even protected the people around you who cannot be vaccinated because they have an immune system problem, because they are too young or because of other health reasons. The World Health Organization stated that these people’s “only hope of protection is that people around them are immune and cannot pass disease on to them.” So being the loving parent you are, you hugged these vulnerable people into a protected herd, surrounding them with vaccinated children who will shield the unimmunized young and old from diseases that could sicken them. You’re true heroes!

You refused to allow society to return to an age we left behind half a century ago, when millions of people worldwide died from diseases that we have been able to prevent for years. The Journal of Pathology reported in 2014 that as many as 8 million children around the world died each year from measles before vaccines were common. You ignored the anti-vaccine hysteria that sweeps the internet and social media like a virus with no cure (so far), and keeps 10% of American families from protecting their children with health-boosting vaccines.

And because some of that 10% includes a small number of people who can’t be vaccinated due to health reasons, the percentage of those who willingly shun inoculations is probably more like 5% to 8% of the United States population. That’s not a small number of people in a nation of more than 327 million, but it’s been that way for a long time. There’s not much you can do to persuade the unpersuadable. Vaccine rates are about the same as they were 20 years ago. Some years a little higher, some years a little lower. The anti-vaccine hysteria has probably flattened vaccine rates, but hasn’t caused steep declines. (As a side note, if vaccines caused autism, then autism rates would have been flat or declining along with vaccine rates. But that hasn’t been the case. The rate of autism diagnoses has risen although vaccine rates have not.) Most years, more than 90% of the population has been inoculated against potentially deadly diseases.

You’re part of an overwhelming majority, folks. Your children are healthier for your choices. You did good.

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MARCH 4, 2019

**The Cookie Mom deserves a badge**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

My living room has turned into one big cookie cupboard. A box of Thin Mints, anyone?

Yes, it’s Girl Scout cookie season, when girls sell cookies door to door and when parents badger their co-workers into buying pricey packages of shortbreads and peanut butter patties, which are also called the cookies formerly known as Trefoils and Tag-Alongs.

My wife volunteered to manage the cookie sales for our daughter’s troop, which has meant that every waking hour of our lives revolves around cookies. If my wife isn’t placing an order for the troop’s next cookie haul, then she’s probably picking up that aforementioned order or busily writing receipts for a family’s pickup or carrying boxes to somebody’s minivan. Wait, that’s me carrying the boxes.

At one point, I estimated 4,000 packages had passed through my home, and I hadn’t gotten so much as a nibble from a single cookie. Fortunately, I ate more than my share of the next thousand packages that arrived.

Girl Scouts have been selling cookies for more than 100 years — and I’m just talking about how long the current cookie season has seemed.

Really, though, the first Girl Scouts to sell cookies were part of the Mistletoe troop from Muskogee, Oklahoma, in 1917. On a related note, Mistletoes and Okies sound like they should have been the names of early Girl Scout cookie varieties. Anyway, the Oklahoma girls baked their own cookies and raised money for the World War I effort. Five years later, a cookie recipe was published in a Scouting magazine to encourage troops to start their own fundraisers.

Now, American Girl Scouts sell more than 200 million dozens, most of which have been in my house this winter. The Girl Scouts of Virginia Skyline council, which covers 36 counties that include the Roanoke and New River valleys, sells about 835,000 boxes of cookies every year.

Molly Bullington is one of the troop moms who has helped with cookie sales this year. Her daughter, Caroline, has sold more than 500 packages. (Another side note: Caroline’s parents own the legendary Texas Tavern on Church Avenue, so you could say that Caroline has sold 500 packages, 10 at a time. Also, a pair of Forget Me Nots make an excellent dessert pairing with a Cheesy Western.)

Molly sold cookies for $2 a box back when she was a Brownie in South Carolina. She mostly sold door to door, but now troops set up booths outside big-box retailers and grocery stores for industrial-sized sales. If you’ve been to a Walmart within the past month, you know how hard it is to resist cookie-bearing Daisies.

“I think it’s good for girls’ self-confidence, communication skills, learning manners, learning to say thank you,” Bullington said of cookie-sale lessons. Even though she has been one of the cookie-sale organizers, Bullington said it’s up to her daughter to handle her sales.

Wendy Schuyler’s 6-year-old daughter, Siena, has been another top seller in the troop. The Schuylers have come up with some innovative sales ideas, from selling during the Women’s March in Roanoke to setting up a booth at Parkway Brewing in Salem on a beautiful February afternoon. In fact, Girl Scout cookie and craft beer pairings are a real thing. My friend Lori Livingston printed out a chart of cookie-and-beer pairings for the Parkway booth. Let me just say, if more cookie booths were set up at craft breweries, I would sign up for more shifts.

Many people often ask why their favorite cookie varieties changed names over the years — like, Tag-Alongs became Peanut Butter Patties and Samoas are known as Caramel deLites. That’s because there are two cookie bakers in the United States, ABC Bakers and Little Brownie Bakers. In our area, cookies come from ABC, which makes the patties and deLites. Some longtime cookie connoisseurs will note that there are some differences between the cookies they remember and the current brands available here.

Still, the cookies remain popular here. Jennifer Pfister, marketing and communications director for the Virginia Skyline office in Roanoke, said that Scouts use the money raised from cookie sales for troop or community-related projects. Girls also earn badges for selling cookies. For many Scouts, sales are like running their own business.

“I call them cookie CEOs,” Pfister said.

If that’s the case, I worry that my own child will be bankrupt someday or perhaps imprisoned, based on her current cookie accounting practices. Her mother, however, deserves a vest-full of merit badges for being the Cookie Mom.

The Roanoke Times

OCT. 28, 2019

**How old is too old to trick-or-treat?**

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

Halloween has become Hallo-teen in my house.

I thought last year’s epic homemade waffle costume, the creation of which was painstakingly chronicled step-by-step for some kids’ crafts blog post that my child never got around to writing, would be a fitting end to my daughter’s esteemed trick-or-treat career. She was 12 years old, after all, the perfect age to go out on top. I was wrong.

My now teenager has created a new costume for Halloween 2019. She’s a character from “Stranger Things,” and she can’t wait to show off her costume this week on our street, where she will once again go begging for candy, plastic jack-o’-lantern in hand, just like she’s done every year since the late aughts. Most of her middle-school pals will be doing the same thing — trick-or-treating as teenagers.

That beats other things they could be doing as teenagers, I suppose. And as I have written before, Halloween is a big deal in our neighborhood, where many families put up decorations like it’s an orange and black Christmas, and where we have seen up to 800 trick-or-treaters in past years. Even the grown-ups get into the fun by dressing up (but not trick-or-treating, I should hasten to add). But my teenage child’s candy-seeking excursion does raise the question: How old is too old to trick-or-treat?

According to some surveys, the consensus opinion about a trick-or-treat cutoff age is around 12 to 13 years old, which puts my child on the high end of the too-old-to-trick-or-treat spectrum. The website FiveThirtyEight.com reported that 57% of Americans said the cutoff age should be between 12 and 15 years old, according to a 2015 poll conducted by Survey Monkey.

Many older children trick-or-treat in my neighborhood, so I am not surprised that my daughter wants to keep the candy coming. She knows a sweet deal when she sees it. Mostly, I don’t mind bigger kids coming around, as long as they follow three rules: put some effort into their costume, say “trick-or-treat” and shave. One thing I can’t stand is a Pokemon character with 5 o’clock shadow.

Besides, what are you gonna do? Card them? Maybe I should put a sign on my front porch that’s the opposite of those age-restriction signs for purchasing beer or cigarettes that you see in convenience stores. “You must have been born AFTER 10/31/2005 to get candy at this house, Junior.”

It’s not worth the fight, anyway. Let’s face it, all those 30-year-old parents hauling their infant children around on Halloween night ain’t asking for candy for the little blob in the stroller. We know who’s gobbling those Sweet Tarts, Pops. So you’ll give it to parents, but not to a 15-year-old in an awesome “Ghostbusters” costume?

The city of Chesapeake was ridiculed mercilessly last year when it was discovered that the city had an ordinance on the books that made it a crime for anyone older than 14 to trick-or-treat. The penalty was a fine up to $100 or six months in jail. I know that some of you are now thinking, “How can I get this ordinance passed in my town, or at least on my street?”

It turns out that the ordinance went on the books in 1970 and that current city leaders didn’t know it even existed until it went viral online last year. Chesapeake’s mayor said the ordinance won’t be enforced and that he expects the city will soon scrap it.

The ordinance was passed because considerable teenage troublemaking had occurred on Halloween back then, the mayor told Time magazine. And just as a side note, any anti-teen ordinance approved in 1970 means that the chief heck-raisers in those days had been born in the mid-1950s. In other words, they are now AARP members who complain about today’s teenagers over “senior coffee” at Hardee’s while longing for the innocent days of their own youths when everybody was so much better behaved.

So let the big kids trick-or-treat. I’ve had friends tell me about their children who dressed in costumes for one last go-around as high schoolers. I wouldn’t be surprised if my child does that someday. Besides, she has already shed many of the other childlike qualities and beliefs. Let her be a little girl for at least one more Halloween. For my sake, if nothing else.

I want her to trick-or-treat next year, too, because that will mean she will have gone out on Halloween night in three separate decades. That’s got to be some kind of record.