



Leaving Juneau: My work for the Alaska Legislature ended in mid-April after 100 days.

Description

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Update of story first appearing April 18, 2018

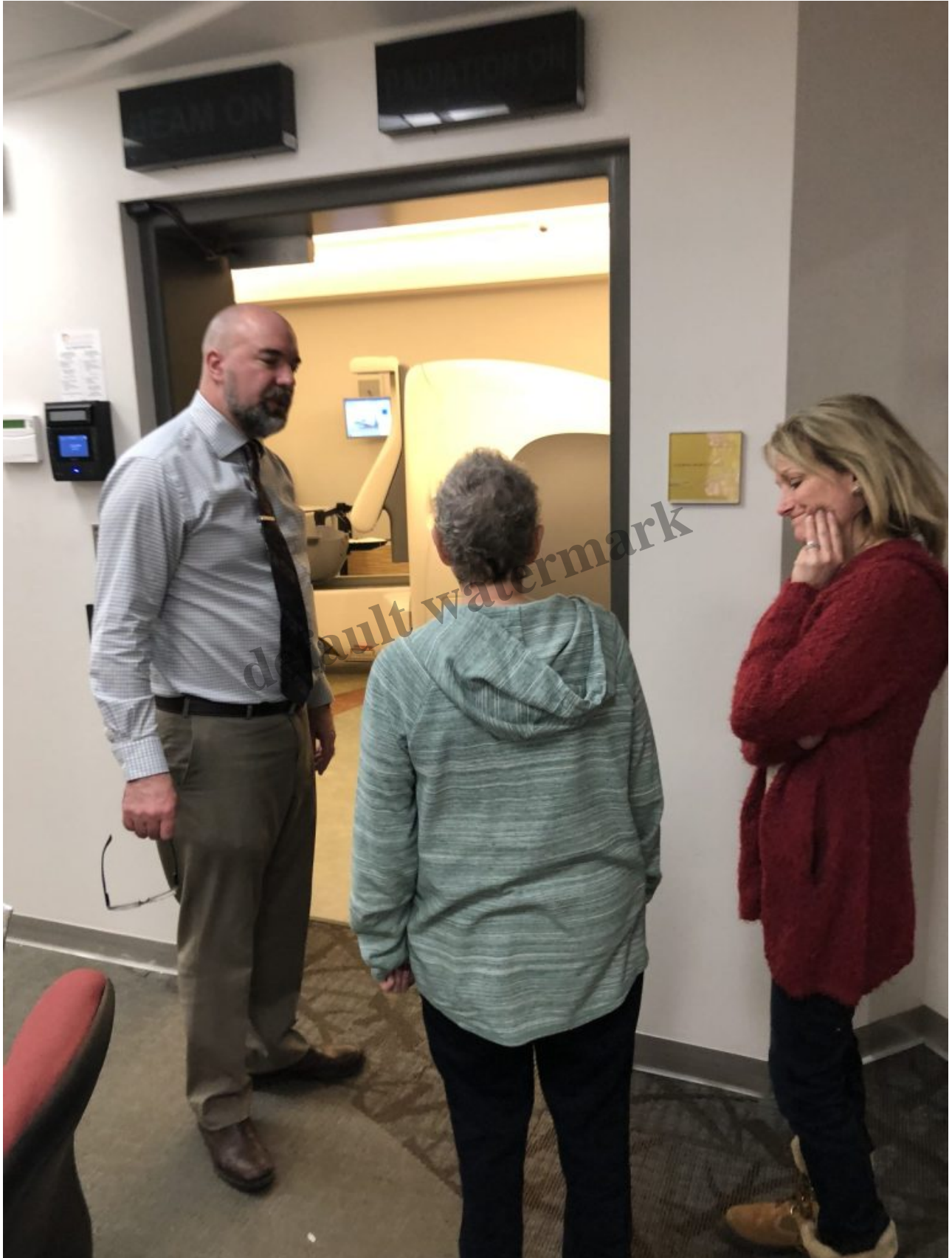


Staged at the Alaska Marine Highway Auke Bay docks.

Reflections upon what I had witnessed in Juneau over this time began while aboard the ***Alaska Marine Highway*** vessel ***M/V Columbia*** as we plied the waters toward Haines. As a certified Alaska teacher I have long been amazed at how Government Education funding is handled as a political hot potato in Backwater Juneau.



While her daughter had set Cat's ticket to fly to Anchorage, Cathy changed it in Seattle to Juneau for our last adventure together.



Cathy underwent brain radiation in February and was never the same person again. Also shown is her daughter from a previous marriage, Shelley Fransway RN who would be fired

from a major Ohio Hospital and have her Registered Nurse license suspended for stealing drugs.

My wife, Cat is back from cancer treatment Outside, our 5th wheel camper is packed, and we are heading home to Eagle River, after my participation as staff for Eagle River Rep. **Lora Reinbold**, in the biggest sporting event in Alaska.



**Iditarod doesn't even come close to the
drama of the legislature in session.**

As with Iditarod, the worst things can happen at the end; when weary dogs give in to political

expedience (or necessity) over previously principled standards of the trail. Bills dormant for more than a year—or increased opportunities for spending—can (and did!) spring to life and be jammed through over **Good Friday** when minority caucus Christians had gone home for a planned break.

To bad you trusted them.

Having only a slim majority caucus means some legislator's votes bought during previous wrangling in committees, and on the House floor, reveal what is possible and what is not likely—but possible with the right maneuver. Good intentions mean nothing. The only thing that matters by the end of this taxing ordeal are the numbers needed to pass legislation: **21 in the House and 11 in the Senate.**

Dump proposed laws on the Senate and watch what happens next.

Cat and I are leaving the arena at a time of raw power—the last hours of play—when head fakes can turn into head-butts—and everything is done with an understanding that it will have to be defended to the voters before November. Most Alaskan voters don't live in Juneau and will have to learn about how the game was played by second-hand reporting, copious research, or unintended consequences.



Haines School

Welcome to Haines!

As we pull up to the dock on this dreary Southeast Alaska day I'm happy. This isn't Juneau.

You can drive to Haines; we have done it many times, and the **Chilkat Valley** is one of the most beautiful places on planet earth. Haines doesn't have the deep gold rush roots that Skagway has but it is quaint. This is where Cat and I came for our honeymoon in 1990 and this is where I taught 6th grade during the 2006-07 school year. You learn a lot about a small community by working at its school.



This young man had been a student in my 6th grade class and now works as a butcher for Haines IGA.

The schools in rural Alaska communities are hubs for learning, for community activities, and for jobs. A nine-month gig at the school gets a local family through winter and leaves plenty of time for hunting, fishing and summertime activities. As a newly-minted k-8 teacher, I was one of some 21 applicants invited to interview for this position. After a heartfelt telephonic interview I turned to Cat and said "that was fun but I won't be offered THAT job!"

I was wrong. The next day Superintendent **Charlie Jones** called and offered me the job—on the condition I would be there and start teaching 23 students in 11 days. Again, I told Cat that didn't seem possible.



Again, she was open to possibilities.

We packed a 42-ft moving van with enough stuff to fill three one-car garages, loaded our new truck, and drove the 777 miles to Haines. My classroom was lovingly prepared for students, and I was ready to on teach Day One.



DONN LISTON, 6th Grade Teacher, Haines, Alaska 2007-08.

It didn't take too long to recognize that while I was the candidate who interviewed best for the Haines 6th grade teaching position, locals had favored candidates other than somebody from Anchorage. This was a Haines job; certified teachers resided in Haines. I was still the first choice.

The other known variable in this equation was the class itself; over the course of my year in the venerable old Haines Elementary School—the last occupancy before it was replaced by a new \$14 million school—I had two separate individuals approach me and say: “Mr. Liston, I have been watching this group of students since kindergarten *and I pray for you every day!*”

But I was resolute; a good teacher deals positively with every student he or she encounters. This is a wonderful time in every child's development. My students would gain a full year of productive instruction and behavior issues would not hamper my efforts because I was myself one of those most obnoxious 6th graders in my time. My hero then was ***Huckleberry Finn!***

The Public Education Elephant in the Room

So far this legislature has passed the fewest bills ever but some would say the stakes for what could

be coming have never been higher.

[1] KTOO Public Broadcasting laments lack of new legislation

In mid-March the House Majority managed to pass a bill to change how the state's public school trust fund is managed to provide MORE funding for public education. The bill was proposed by Juneau School Crossing guard turned legislator, Rep. **Justin Parish**.

[2] Rep. Parish pours more money into unaccountable public education

Its passage March 19, with 21Y – 18N and 1 excused, moved it to the Senate amid fervor about ending the annual “Pink Slip Circus,” wherein teachers are threatened with layoff as economic blackmail for increased education funding. On April 23 this bill was moved out of Senate Finance to the Rules Committee for scheduling to the Floor. to check on its status go to: [_](#)

[3] Historic Information available at AKLEG.com

Grandstanding for early education funding also prevailed in HB 287, “An Act making appropriations for public education and transportation of students; and providing for an effective date” which, when passed out of the house February 7 turned out to be all show. It only funded student transportation across the state and for Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school!

“Senate President **Pete Kelly**, R-Fairbanks, when asked said he thinks House leaders were “knowingly misleading” in saying that the bill would fund all schools early.

“I don’t want you to think that the Senate doesn’t have a desire to early fund education, because we do, Kelly said. We’re just very disappointed that in a discussion about early funding that three weeks were completely wasted in the House.”

[4] House Bill will Need Senate Re-Write to Fund Schools Early

As an Alaskan teacher, I regret that nobody is talking about academic accountability; parents who succeeded in public education have students who succeed in public education. Performance be damned by the rest. By now everyone knows Alaska pays among the most per student among all of the states and we have the worst test scores among all of the states. I became personally aware of the dimension of our broken education system as an Adult Basic Education instructor 10-1/2 years in Anchorage and the Mat-Su valley. I helped students pass a nationally normed 12th grade test so they could get into a career. [_](#)

[5] National Test Scores bring more Bad News about Alaska Schools, Juneau Empire, April 10, 2018

Over the decades I have learned—first as a public education advocate in Juneau and since 2003 as a classroom teacher—how our system has become a conduit for state money regardless of outcomes. This is the soft bigotry of low expectations; falling hardest on disadvantaged people or minorities who are not required to meet the same standard of behavior or achievement as expected elsewhere. On the other hand, when prepared academically these students who quit, were kicked out or failed public education are not afraid of tests.



Check out DONN's International Substack:
donnliston907.substack.com

In one small example I witnessed education economic priorities in Haines: Every year the **Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)** declares the period in which student enrollment will be measured for establishing State funding levels to each of the more than 50 communities with a school board and superintendent. When the "count day" was announced in Haines, parents were told their children must not miss that day of school.

For Rural Alaska, Education Funding is Manna

from Heaven

When we went to Haines in 2016 Cathy had just received disability social security retirement after nearly 30 years of banking. A health event in 2003 had taken her out of her job as a manager and trouble-shooter for **Northrim Bank's** 10 branches. Being a detail person who knew how to balance a bank branch day-to-day, Cat was looking forward to this new adventure as wife of a teacher.



Haines School was built with a \$14 million bond nobody I knew admits voting for.

Once in Haines we found a hotel and set up housekeeping. As in the past Cathy cooked, cleaned and made my lunches. I made my lesson plans and worked out my classroom management plan. She decided she could take over grading, which meant using an answer sheet to correct papers, and assigning a numerical grades.

Something else I learned here was that the most important person in any school is the principal's secretary. In fact, the school secretary at Haines had a son in my class AND she managed the school-wide database for grades. Report Cards would be issued directly from her based on this computer system. My mathematically gifted wife dutifully graded my student's papers and entered into the grading system exactly the grade each had earned.



Ten years after our Haines Adventure we would return to Juneau so DONN could serve as legislative aide to Rep. Lora Reinbold, who took this photo of us in her 4th floor capital office, before our last roadtrip to our mountainside home in Eagle River.

We Were a Great Team!

Then the almost unbelievable happened. A week before Thanksgiving Break Superintendent Jones called me into his office. There, he closed the door and looked me in the eye: *Donn, you probably know by now that there are students in your class who have parents on the school board, on the local assembly, and you even have parents who work in this school.*

Of course I couldn't disagree with that.

AND, *you have been doing a good job of putting your grades into the grading system. We appreciate that,*

Jones affirmed, before becoming deadly serious. *So let me be clear in what I am about to say: If the grades you have now posted appear on the first report cards for your class, this town will lynch you. You will need to fix them*

When I returned home and told Cathy what she had to do, she was shocked and incredulous—but I wasn't.

References:

- [1] KTOO Public Broadcasting laments lack of new legislation
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- [2] Rep. Parish pours more money into unaccountable public education
<http://mustreadalaska.com/justin-parishs-monday-blues/>
- [3] Historic Information available at AKLEG.com
<http://www.akleg.gov/basis/Bill/Detail/30?Root=hb%20213>
- [4] House Bill will Need Senate Re-Write to Fund Schools Early
<https://www.alaskapublic.org/2018/02/13/house-bill-will-need-senate-rewrite-to-fund-schools-early/>
- [5] National Test Scores bring more Bad News about Alaska Schools, Juneau Empire, April 10, 2018
<http://juneauempire.com/state/news/2018-04-10/national-test-scores-bring-more-bad-news-alaska-schools>

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1. Alaska Elected Officials
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