

fixing

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Tracey Dina. Photo: Jim Bush

TRACY DIINA'S SOLUTIONS: REGIONALISM, LIBERTARIANISM, LITERACY

by Glenn Gramigna

Only three years ago, 33-year-old Tracy Diina was the hard working Director of Marketing and Public Relations for the Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corp., a city agency devoted to using government initiatives to aid economic development. These days she's a card-carrying Libertarian who believes that all such interventions by government constitute an intolerable and destructive form of "interference" in our glorious free enterprise system.

In her early twenties, she practiced a counter cultural lifestyle which rejected the more conventional habits of her commercially successful and politically well connected family. Today, she heads Literacy Volunteers of Buffalo & Western New York, a well respected nonprofit organization which seeks to teach functionally illiterate clients to read with help from volunteer tutors.

"I've never been the kind of person who believes in just sticking with the status quo when you can see that things are going wrong," Diina points out. "I've been reading Ayn Rand a lot lately and I've come to believe that what Buffalo needs is not stasis but a willingness to accept new ideas that will work no matter where they lead. Right now we are risk averse and afraid of change. Any good ideas that someone might have end up being buried by the bureaucracy. So our whole attitude would be one thing that would really need to be different if we are going to fix Buffalo."

Diina would begin by encouraging people to alter their entire view of what Buffalo is and what it's likely to become.

"I think the first thing we need to do is accept what we are," she suggests. "Our population had declined to what about 290,000. We need to stop looking for silver bullets and take an inventory of ourselves and accept the fact that we are not going to be some great metropolis. That's not what we are and it's not what we are going to be."

After that, she would scuttle the City Hall complex from which she used to draw her pay in favor of a more regional approach.

"I think what we need is a metro government," Diina proposes. "Right now we have the city government and the county government and there's an incredible duplication of services. The Common Council and the County Legislature perform many of the same functions and we don't need both."

Instead of the stratified democracy we have now, Diina would like to see a metropolitan system that would reign over all of Erie County, one in which public services would be kept to a minimum and career politicians would be shown the door.

"I got to know many career politicians while I was working at City Hall and I can tell you that most of them start out as well motivated people who really want to do some good," she reports. "But, as time goes on they get caught up in the system and they begin to realize how important it is for them personally to hold on to their job or ascend to the next

level so they can maintain their income for their families and pay their mortgages and so on. And, pretty soon they get distracted from what was supposed to be the initial purpose, which was to serve the public interest. As a result, they become very cautious and very often new ideas or anything that might jeopardize their position doesn't have a chance."

Along with her regionalized governmental structure she'd like to see common goals established and a definite mechanism in place to decide how much progress we are making toward reaching them.

"Instead of all of us going off in their own directions, I think we need a common regional agenda and also a kind of annual report card, similar to what the United Way does, that would tell us how well we're doing at meeting our goals. How well are we doing in terms of lowering our taxes, bringing new companies in here, or lowering Buffalo's crime rate, for example? We would get the answers to these questions every year and that way we'd know where we are."

Still, as all of Erie County pulled together to reach these goals according to Diina's vision, the Heavy Hand of Government would be noticeably absent as a major weapon in our common arsenal.

"I learned a lot working for government and felt I was able to do some good at the BEREC," Diina contends.

"But, in the end I realized that any help you give one company in the form of tax incentives and so on is

continued on page 109

TRACY DIINA

continued from page 105

done at the expense of other companies. I began to see that when it comes to fixing Buffalo, government is not the solution it's the problem.."

Instead of government regs, Diina's prescription for fixing Buffalo involves nixing all laws against behavior. In her Randian brave new world, there would be no penalties for drug use, prostitution, or even corporate swindling. "If those things happened, we'd just have to accept it," she contends. "It is all part of accepting and trusting the rights of individuals."

On the other hand, Diina is not a champion of the individual's right to remain illiterate, proposing a massive campaign to reduce illiteracy.

"Did you know that thirty percent of the residents of Buffalo are functionally illiterate?" she asks. "Seventy-six percent of adults on public assistance are unable to read the simplest texts. I've been involved with federal job training programs and I know that the big problem is that many of the trainees aren't ready to succeed in the programs because they don't have basic skills.

Why should people want to locate their businesses here if our people can't read well enough to get through job training?"

Her solution: Neighborhood literacy centers that would cater to those so challenged right in their own communities. Also literacy centers in large offices and factories.

" literacy is often at the root of our economic problems, and it's never even mentioned," Diina says

It's a long road from City Hall to Ayn Rand. Yet, Diina seems to have successfully circumnavigated this unlikely intellectual trail. How much farther will she travel and in what direction? Nobody knows. The only thing certain is that she won't be afraid to follow her conclusions to their ultimate end...no matter how radical or inconvenient the journey on which they take her.

Glenn Gramigna writes for many local and national publications.

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