



There's no skating around the value of personal accountability

By Jim Waters

I couldn't believe my eyes.

While driving by Bowling Green's new skatepark the other day, I must have seen two dozen kids gyrating and flying through the air. Not a single one of these budding extreme-sports stars wore a helmet to protect themselves against falls into a sea of concrete.

I've heard many complaints about this. One parent demanded that "the city do something about those kids out there not wearing a helmet without any supervision. The city needs to pass a law or something."

When I heard that, my mind started spinning like a skater executing a "360" coming out of a half-pipe.

The city doesn't require skateboarders to wear protective gear. However, it does post this common-sense inducing warning sign at the park: "Use of safety equipment, such as helmets and pads, is strongly recommended and encouraged."

Would a law instead of that sign magically result in scores of kids using protective gear and acting responsibly? And what makes this well-intentioned woman think a government mandate would do what the warning sign fails to do?

When Bowling Green first entertained creating a skatepark, a local contingency traveled to Louisville's extreme-sports park to consult with those in charge and get a look at the facility. Louisville passed an ordinance requiring skateboarders to wear helmets. Yet, one official told me that during their meeting, a skater turned up – sans helmet – and launched into his twisting, spinning routine.

Even a law – supposedly with some teeth – passed by Louisville's Metro Council didn't prompt that skateboarder to consider that he might knock out his teeth ... or worse.

Now, I'm not advocating anarchy. I support reasoned (and enforced) laws in limited numbers to deter evildoers and violence, protect people and property and ensure a level playing field in business. But the undeniable truth is: No amount of legislation can substitute for personal responsibility.

How often do people get thrown in jail – especially for breaking drug laws – only to serve their time, get out and end up back behind bars for similar offenses?

Laws punish offenders for acting irresponsibly, but they cannot create responsible people. If they could, we wouldn't need churches to transform lives or parents to guide children toward a path of moral strength.

Supporters of big government often contend that all bureaucrats need do is pull a law out of a hat and "voila!" – scads of responsible people appear.

That's an illusion.

Still, we continue to hear politicians insist on passing laws that intrude into our cars, businesses and bedrooms. Most of them are great for inching up the inmate count and lousy for reducing miscreant behavior.

If a law could make people quit smoking and those who don't avoid smokers, why will 8,000 Kentuckians die from tobacco-related illnesses this year? And Kentucky recently passed a law requiring ATV riders to wear helmets – even on private property. This intrusive law did not reduce fatalities. In fact, fatalities rose.

Does government miss something when it creates these kinds of laws? No. People miss something – common sense. They make choices and sometimes pay the ultimate price for them.

Some skateboarders have already broken bones and incurred other serious injuries at Bowling Green's skatepark, but not because the city code lacks a law requiring protective gear. Rather, the injured *chose* to fly without protection, and they paid the consequences.

But hope springs eternal, even if helmets won't.

I talked to one parent who takes responsibility for her 12-year-old son.

“No helmet, no skating – that's the rule in our house,” she told me. Her son usually whines about how it isn't “cool” to wear a helmet, she said.

She doesn't budge: “It's not cool to be laying up in a nursing home somewhere with brain damage, either,” she tells him.

She's not waiting on some government law to keep her son safe. She chooses to exercise responsibility while teaching her son to act responsibly – as a skateboarder and a citizen.

Good for her.

Now if only every obese, ATV-ridin' Kentucky smoker and skateboarder would do the same.

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