

From the Baltimore Sun

# Into spotlight to join debate on Columbia

## Alan Klein turns activist in fight over downtown plan

by a Sun reporter

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Alan Klein is hardly one who would be branded an activist.

He did stump for Sen. Eugene McCarthy's campaign to unseat President Lyndon B. Johnson at the age of 15, and, in the late 1980s, joined an effort to keep the Ku Klux Klan from setting up shop in a small West Virginia community. Other than those two excursions, though, he has been content leaving the protesting to others.

Klein characterizes himself as a "practicing schizophrenic." But cerebral seems a more apt description.

He is soft-spoken, reflective, punctuates discussions with anecdotes of family and appears to have a genuine aversion to the spotlight.

But Klein finds himself today at the forefront of the debate over downtown Columbia's future, and he promises a passionate fight against the county's plan to transform it into an urban center.

Even he acknowledges the incongruity of moving out from the shadows to form a coalition intent on forcing a substantial scaling back of the plan for downtown.

"It's one of those confluences of the right issue, or set of issues, and right time," he says.

"After the charrette," Klein says, referring to last year's weeklong brainstorming sessions on the development of downtown, "the bottom line is, it activated my sense of outrage. It was almost a betrayal of trust."

He uses words like trust and values frequently, and while they sometimes seem disingenuous flowing from the mouths of politicians, they are, more than anything, what have shaped Klein, as a child and adult.

His parents advised him years ago: "If your goal in life is to be rich, you'll never be satisfied

because there's always more money to be made, and there's always someone richer than you, so that's a recipe for unhappiness."

And while Klein knew early that he wanted to be a teacher, he knew almost as early that he wanted to be a different kind of teacher than most.

"The best general name for it would be more student-centered," he says.

The root of that was his mother's remembrances of attending a progressive school in New York. But he also had the ideal model while enrolled in an upper-level math class at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda.

His teacher, Lois Croft, whom Klein describes as "an elderly Helen Hays [with] the shock of white hair, round face and big grin," treated her students unlike any instructor that he had encountered.

"When she graded papers, she never marked anything wrong," Klein remembers. "She used green ink, and marked what we got right. And at the end of each grading period, she had a conference with each one of us and jointly we decided what grade we'd get. She always maintained that we were harder on ourselves than she would have been."

Klein was born Sept. 1, 1953, in Worcester, Mass., about 45 miles west of Boston. He was the third of four sons of Donald and Lola Klein.

Donald Klein was a clinical physiologist but worked mostly with groups. He joined the NTL Institute, a nonprofit educational company, whose focus is behavioral sciences and the development of effective leadership for organizations.

Lola Klein was a nursery school teacher briefly, but she decided after World War II to forgo a career and raise a family.

The family moved to Bethesda when Alan Klein was in high school. When he graduated in 1971, they left his youngest brother with friends, sold the house, bought a motor home and began traveling the country.

One of their first stops was to visit friends who were renting the historic Richland farm on Sheppard Lane in Ellicott City. In one of those throwaway lines that become prophetic, the Kleins remarked as they prepared to depart: "Oh, if you ever leave, let us know. We would love to live here. It's so gorgeous."

The call came when they reached Oregon. Their friends were moving, and the farm was available. The Kleins decided on the spot to rent the farmhouse. They remained until late 1999, when Lola Klein's health worsened.

Alan Klein enrolled at the University of Michigan. He was not content to declare a major; he

mapped out with precision every class for the next four years in several disciplines.

"I couldn't stand to focus only on one thing at any one time," he says.

He graduated in four years with a bachelor's degree in social science, minors in physiology and performing arts and certifications to teach secondary and elementary education.

Klein turned down a job in Key Largo, Fla. "I had the sense that if I became a beach bum, that would be the end of me."

He taught in Ann Arbor, Mich., schools for three years, including a weekend, high school-level self-image development program. He and another teacher were permitted to implement their student-centered theory when a principal turned over to them a three-room wing and they combined the second through sixth grades.

"We created a school within a school," Klein says. "It was based not on age level of the students but on activities."

Klein was married in 1976 and he and his wife moved near Philadelphia, where they both worked for a progressive school. A daughter, Rebecca, was born three years later.

The marriage failed, and Klein moved to the Richland farm, where his parents lived, and spent a year as a substitute teacher in Howard County.

He believes he could have remained at Thunder Hill Elementary, but he found the school system too restrictive.

"Teachers are entrusted with our most precious beings, yet they have to sign out for a box of paper clips," Klein says.

He was reading The Washington Post one morning in 1981 when he saw an advertisement for a teacher.

A couple, Charlotte and Steve Landvoigt, had struck it rich in oil, wanted to give something back to the community and had decided to form an independent, progressive school on 500 acres in west-central West Virginia.

Klein was offered the position, but he was conflicted because it meant living far from his daughter. He finally reasoned, "I had to be the best person I could be, in order to be the best father for her. I could not be that if I was to be miserable in a job."

He accepted the job, and, in the fall of 1981, became the first teacher at Highland School.

Highland was unorthodox, compared with traditional schools, but it was exactly what Klein was searching for.

"It is basically run democratically in terms of one person, one vote," he says. "The students have a say, the teachers have a say."

'A lot of choice'

But it was more than democratic. At the root, he says, was the belief "that we are all responsible for our own education, even in those schools where we are told what to do ultimately. ... We still have a lot of choice of whether or not we pay attention, or we acknowledge what's happening, or we resist it. The bottom line is we are responsible, so why not take that seriously? We made the decision that students want to learn."

Klein married again in 1986 and he and his wife had a daughter, Kelly.

Three years later, his wife wanted to leave teaching, and with Highland well established by then, "it became time to leave," Klein says.

The family moved back to the farm in Howard County, where he taught gifted-and-talented students part time in the public school system.

"In a sense, it was the best job I could get in the county," he says. "Yet I was teaching 140 kids in a week and sometimes seeing them once or twice a week for 30 or 45 minutes. I realized halfway through the year that there were some kids whose names I barely knew.

"My whole thing was about the relationship with the kids, not about the content, so that was unsettling."

During spring break in 1990, he quit and formed a business, Klein Consulting. He had no clients, but the timing was perfect, he says, because computers were taking hold in offices and homes, but most people were uncomfortable using them.

"People were scared stiff of them," Klein says. "But I could speak both languages."

He still does computer consulting, but most of his business today is as a subcontractor for firms retained by other companies to provide training on group development, personal effectiveness, diversity and team-building.

His second marriage failed in 2002, but he retained custody of Kelly. He moved to Hobbit's Glen in Columbia two years ago.

Klein was content looking after his daughters and expanding the business until friends began telling him that the county's plan for downtown did not resemble what the public had embraced during the first day of the charrette, or as he puts it, "The whole way of how citizen input was disregarded."

Obligated

He says he felt obligated to become involved because the future of downtown "is such a large-

enough issue. It touches so many things."

Klein was not a member of a county-appointed focus group reviewing the county's plan, but he attended virtually all of the meetings for the past year. Still concerned with the proposal, he recently helped form a coalition to oppose the current plan and work for broad changes.

"There are elements of the current plan that I think are just fine, so it's not that I want the whole plan scuttled," he says. "There are major values, I think, that have been left out."

The values driving the plan have been consistently discussed among the focus group, but Klein and some others believe that the county has failed to respond to those concerns.

The current plan would permit 5,500 additional housing units, 3 million square feet of new commercial offices and 750,000 square feet for retail. It would impose a general height limitation of 14 stories, although county officials have said they might prefer that cap to be flexible.

"What is lacking in it is the sense of real vision, of even perhaps grand vision," he says. "It's a utilitarian plan for squeezing in a number of people and offices. ... It seems to me that it's worked backward. It could have worked forwards by taking what the people said in October - that first day of the charrette - and saying, 'Here's the values propositions that we want to design to.'

'Eight stories or 20'

"Instead, they asked, 'Which would you prefer, eight stories or 20 stories? And we'll have this density here and here's the road plan. Here's stuff, before we speak to the value propositions.' And I think that is due because they turned over the operation to DPZ [Department of Planning and Zoning]. There's nothing wrong with DPZ, but they don't do grand vision. Their purpose is to implement regulations and to adjudicate whether this can go there based upon the regulations."

Some of the values that Klein believes the final plan must address are housing for low-income families, new cultural venues for the public and keeping traffic to "a human scale" so that congestion does not become a daily fact of life in downtown Columbia.

The coalition, he says, represents the "missing piece in the discussion" about the future of downtown.

"It's the way the community can hold its own in the face of county officials or DPZ or General Growth Properties Inc. [the primary land owner in Columbia] or the developers."

Those interested in learning more about the coalition may contact Klein at [alan@klein.net](mailto:alan@klein.net).

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