

COMMENTARY

Being a valentine isn't what it used to be

When I was a boy, I wasn't a huge fan of Valentine's Day. First off, it was a lot of work. I remember the first time my teacher told us we needed a "mailbox." Not to be confused with an actual mailbox (with an actual purpose), this was to be an old shoebox that my mom would help me wrap in white tissue paper and decorate with hearts, cupids and other assorted super-masculine stuff.

I was certain that the only thing more painful than creating this tribute to some diaper-wearing archer would be the walk to school with it tucked under my arm.

I was wrong. The most painful moment was not any of the 87 times one of my schoolmates stopped me to comment on how pretty my box was.

No. The real pain came in the classroom. I sat behind my neatly primped little box with its shiny metallic hearts cut from tin foil (yes, I'm old enough to call it tin foil) and red sparkles, the envy of everyone, well, every girl. Then I watched as one after another, my male classmates revealed their shoeboxes.

They all looked like ... shoeboxes. No hearts! No cupids! One guy didn't even have a lid! "It's OK," I thought to myself. "The girls are going to love this box. It shows I'm sensitive."

Turns out the only thing this box showed was that I was a sissy with too much time on my hands. It didn't matter, though, because those cards were addressed long before the day of delivery.

"Tin foil" — remember? I'm old. Back when I was a kid, the educational system didn't coddle kids with rules designed

R.J. Foster
Community Columnist



R.J. Foster is a Darboy resident.

to spare their feelings. If little Susie Goldenlocks didn't want to give you a valentine, so be it. And if your box was light on cards, hey, get a clue! Paste is an adhesive — not a snack food!

Even before Valentine's Day, there was the painstaking process of selecting the valentine cards. There were not as many to pick from as there are today. You could go soft — Barbie, Holly Hobby or Hello Kitty. You could go tough — GI Joe, or maybe the Six Million Dollar Man. Or you could go neutral — cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, Flintstones or Scooby Doo.

The problem for me was that, no matter which route you took, there was never the right amount of clever, non-mushy sayings.

Flintstones: "Yabba dabba doo be my valentine!" Yuck!

GI Joe: "I'd fight for you, valentine." Arrrrggghhh!

Barbie: Does it even matter? It's Barbie.

How cool it would have been to see GI Joe on a card saying, "Be my valentine and I won't stomp you into the dirt, maggot!" Or a Scooby Doo/Shaggy one that said, "Zoinks! Better be my valentine cuz I hear the paste-eating kid likes you!"

I remember celebrating Daughter No. 1's first Valen-

tine's Day. As a father, I could help decorate the box without shame. And when she asked, "Gee, Daddy, how do you know so much about decorating valentine boxes," I just changed the topic.

I was awestruck by how many options there were for cards — cartoon characters, rock stars, movie stars — even a few classics like Pooh Bear and Scooby Doo. I don't recall what she chose, but I do remember the messages were very politically correct.

I believe it was Winnie the Pooh asking, "Will you consider acknowledging our acquaintance on this celebration of non-physical fondness?" And that was the mushy one.

When Daughter No. 1 got home that afternoon, she had a huge pile of cards. Some even had candy taped to them.

"You must be the most popular kid in your class!" I exclaimed proudly.

"Everyone gets the same amount, Daddy," she replied.

"Everyone?" I inquired. "Even the kid who eats the paste?"

"Everyone," she added. "And what's paste?"

By the time Daughter No. 2 started, the card options were greater, the messages were blander and candy was expected. Being a bit more like her daddy than her sister, she asked, "Can I give the boys 'b-candy'?" You know, the stuff you don't like but save for teenage trick-or-treaters.

I smiled, hugged my little girl, and said, "Of course. And we'll get that stale candy corn for the kid who eats the paste."

"I love you, Daddy," she said with a smile. "But what the heck is paste?"