

IN AMERICA, THE LITTLE GUYS CAN STILL TAKE ON THE BIG GUYS — AND WIN

I will share my opinions on the recent elections with you when all the media pundits have stopped to catch their breath and I can be sure the political consultants have crawled back into the mud holes from whence they came. It's just too noisy right now.

In the meantime, let me relate to you a true story about how a group of local citizens took on the biggest bank in the nation and tanned their pinstriped fannies. There is a moral to this tale.

It started innocently enough when the Alapaha Area council of the Boy Scouts of America, headquartered in Valdosta, asked Charlotte-based Bank of America Corp. for a \$1,000 donation. Now, a thousand dollars to a bank with over one trillion dollars in assets doesn't even qualify as pocket change. They spend more than that on towels for the executive washrooms. So, imagine the shock when the Scouts were told "no." The bank's foundation, responsible for doling out the money, said the BSA discriminates against homosexuals because they won't let them be Scout leaders. Therefore, there would be no check in the mail.

That should have been the end of the story, but it was just the beginning. The corporate suits forgot who they were dealing with. If folks in South Georgia can handle sand gnats and humidity that you can cut with a knife, they sure aren't afraid to take on a big corporation like Bank of America.

Matt Hart, the scout executive for the Alapaha council, wrote the bank after the refusal and said, "Every nonprofit organization serves a specific audience, as does Scouting. To open membership to those who do not share the values of the Scout Oath and Law would violate our constitutional right to freedom of association." He pointed out that other nonprofits restrict membership, including gender, race or other practices. He also slyly mentioned that a young boy doesn't have the right to join the Girl Scouts. Ouch!

People in Valdosta began closing accounts at the local Bank of America office, including the Alapaha council, which happened to be a pretty good customer of the bank. Andy Smith, a Valdosta attorney who is president of the Alapaha council and a longtime customer, closed his account and fired off a letter to bank chairman Ken Lewis, saying, "You say you seek diversity, and then you try to stamp it out by making everyone follow your policy line. This is a terrible way to run a bank in Valdosta." Frankly, it is a terrible way to run a bank anywhere.

In the end, the bank blinked and wound up giving the Alapaha council \$1,700, instead of their original request of \$1,000. They also changed a donation policy that practiced reverse discrimination. And the Scouts' policy is still the same as it was before the big hoo-hah with Bank of America.

So what is the moral to this story? Actually, there are two. First, in our country, the little guy can still take on the big guys and win. Most folks would have thrown up their hands and just railed at the injustice of it all. The Alapaha council decided to challenge the policies of the largest bank in the country — and they won.

Second, no institution — including utilities, retailers or even the news media — can be an effective player in the local community when key management decisions are being made in some corporate treetop in some distant home office, far, far away from living, breathing customers. It seems that in all of their merging and consolidating, the bureaucrats at Bank of America had overlooked this very important point.

I am delighted at how this story turned out. The Boy Scouts will positively influence more young people in the communities they serve than all the mega-banks and gay rights special-interest groups on the planet. They will also stand up for their beliefs.

A wise old manager once told me, "In the corporate world, we take advantage of the weak and the strong take advantage of us." It worked in Valdosta. It can work anywhere.