Governor, build a legacy on CPS fix

“We cannot strike evil from the hearts of those who would harm an innocent child. ... These past four years, we have tackled hard questions and faced moral challenges. My friends: This, too, is a moral issue. Arizona must protect her children.”

— Gov. Jan Brewer, January 2013

So here we are: at the beginning of the end of the Jan Brewer era. One final year in which our governor can shape what the history books will say about her stewardship of this state.

So many images come to mind:

Brewer, the accidental governor who rode Senate Bill 1070 into her own term and delighted in sticking it to Barack Obama at every available opportunity.

Brewer, the darling of the GOP faithful with her defiant tone and wagging finger.

Brewer, the red-state governor who defied her own party and ultimately supported “Obamacare,” expanding Medicaid to hundreds of thousands of low-income Arizonans.

Brewer, the sometimes clueless, occasionally courageous governor who has the opportunity now to do what none of her predecessors has been able to manage.
She can fix, finally, what ails Arizona’s most woeful agency, Child Protective Services.

I’ve been following CPS for two decades, ever since 20-month-old China Marie Davis and 3-year-old TaJuana Davidson were murdered in 1993 by their foster parents. China Marie was broken limb by limb before she finally succumbed. TaJuana was beaten with tree limbs, bruised, whipped and broken while CPS should have been watching.

Promises of CPS reform followed those little girls into their too-early graves, yet nothing really changed.

Band-Aids were applied and a decade later, children were still dying as CPS looked on. Andredra Robertson lasted 10 days, her intestines rotted by exposure to crack cocaine after CPS sent her home with a mother who admitted she’d smoked crack up to and even on the day she gave birth. Liana Sandoval was 20 months old, her battered body found wired to a rock at the bottom of a canal just one day after CPS found no evidence of abuse.

Then-Gov. Janet Napolitano vowed reform, yet nothing really changed.

More Band-Aids were heaped onto the ailing agency until 2007, when Ariana and Tyler Payne died after CPS left them with an abusive father. New Band-Aids held until 2011, when 23-month-old Janie Buelna died, her body scarred, her teeth broken and her leg ravaged by an untreated burn after CPS walked away. And 6-year-old Jacob Gibson, beaten to death despite five calls to CPS. And Jhessye Shockley, 5, whose body still lies out there somewhere.

At least seven children died on CPS’ watch in 2011, and Brewer vowed reform, yet nothing really changed.

Governor, please. Resist the urge to pop yet another Band-Aid on this broken agency.

The problem here is not just that CPS ignored reports of abuse. It’s also questionable judgments that allow too many children to die while others are taken away from families that pose no danger.

It’s overwhelmed workers and a blurred mission. It’s a nightmarish bureaucracy and a Legislature unwilling to properly fund a child-welfare system that for years has been a mismanaged mess.

So it’s time, Governor, to embrace your inner Miley Cyrus — but for good, not grotesque — and get up there on that wrecking ball. Level CPS and replace it with a new stand-alone agency.

One focused on protecting children, not bad bureaucrats. One funded at a level that allows committed caseworkers to help vulnerable children. One in which the culture is reborn, where problems are addressed rather than pushed out of sight.

Where the primary mission is clear: to protect children.

There will be those who see no need for fundamental reform, just more money. There will be those who reach for that old box of Band-Aids.

Please, Governor, don’t follow their lead. Use the end of your term to build a legacy that’ll endure long after you leave office. Be that improbable governor who sets aside the Band-Aids, the one not willing to settle for an easy fix.

The one who served, finally, as a champion to children who have none.
Senator’s driving expenses defy logic

Never let it be said that there is a politician more on the move — a man more willing to go the extra mile, so to speak, for the rest of us — than Sen. Don Shooter. The guy’s a regular travelin’ man.

State records show that Shooter racked up enough miles on his car last year to drive around the world 1 1/2 times. Either that, or he’s a triple dipper, dinging both taxpayers and campaign donors to pay for his apparently vast travels around his legislative district.

It appears that Shooter also used campaign funds to pay for his legal defense after he burst into a Yuma school last spring, interrupting a class to confront a teacher.

Shooter didn’t return several phone calls to discuss his almost $26,500 travel tab or to explain how hiring an attorney to fight a criminal prosecution is a campaign expense.

Several lawyers tell me Shooter likely didn’t violate any laws — which says more about the state of this state’s campaign-finance laws than it does about the quality of our lawmakers.

One attorney, however, said the Internal Revenue Service would likely be quite interested in how the senator is paying his legal bills.

Shooter, R-Yuma, is one of the Legislature’s more colorful characters, a two-termer.
perhaps best known for barging into his grandson’s school and for wearing weird hats.

A couple of years ago, he showed up at the Capitol sporting a sombrero, a serape and a holster packed with what appeared to be a half-filled bottle of tequila.

This, during a special session held to extend unemployment benefits.

He’s already distinguished himself this year, telling a reporter that he considers sports tickets and other lobbyist-supplied freebies a supplement to his $24,000 legislative salary.

“Give us a raise, we’ll buy our own tickets,” he told 3TV’s Dennis Welch recently.

Did I mention that Shooter’s also chairman of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee? As a result, he rakes in the campaign dough from lobbyists and special interests seeking entre into his good graces.

According to campaign-finance records filed last week, Shooter raised nearly $43,000 from December 2012 through the end of 2013 — about three-quarters of that from those who have business at the Legislature. Though 2013 wasn’t an election year, he spent nearly $38,000 on his “campaign” — the bulk of it on himself.

Records show $15,100 went to pay Shooter’s legal fees — including $10,100 to criminal-defense attorney Ed Novak, who represented the senator when he was charged in last spring’s school dust-up.

But the most fascinating of his “campaign” expenses was his travel tab.

Shooter’s campaign-finance report shows that he paid himself $18,435 for travel last year, using campaign donors’ money to reimburse himself for mileage and then again for fuel.

That, apparently, is OK as long as he really logged all those miles on the campaign trail and didn’t just log a check into his personal bank account.

“The fact that he’s reimbursing himself for mileage is not extraordinary unless the mileage was not campaign-related,” attorney Kory Langhofer told me.

“I will say it’s unusual for candidates to be reimbursing themselves for mileage this early in the (election) cycle.”


And then there was Shooter, who collected $18,435.

Senate records show he collected an additional $8,029 from taxpayers for his commute to the Capitol to conduct legislative business. Legislators are paid 0.445 cent a mile to commute from wherever they are spending the night, which would be the Phoenix area for most of the week during the legislative session.

Assuming he used a 0.445-cent mileage-reimbursement rate, Shooter is claiming that he drove 20,550 miles campaigning in a non-election year and an additional 18,042 miles for his commute to the Capitol.

That’s 38,592 miles — or 29 days straight behind the wheel if you figure an average speed of 55 mph.

38,592 miles.

That’s enough for 5 1/2 round trips to Fairbanks, Alaska, if Shooter has snow tires.

Or nearly four trips to London and back, assuming his trusty car could be outfitted with fins.

That’s enough to send Shooter motorizing up to the International Space Station and back more than 80 times.

Or to dispatch him on a road trip all the way around the world and then halfway around again.

Which, come to think of it, might not be a bad idea.
We missed a chance to uncover common ground in gun debate

Another month, another Arizona gun story.

July brought us the gun-toting doctor who marched through Sky Harbor, his trusty AR-15 dangling from his shoulder as people around him scattered. It was a story that made international headlines.

August brought us the tragedy of a little girl given an Uzi, as her parents stood proudly by videoing the occasion — a horror heard around the world.

September brings us the other side of the Second Amendment, a widow with a gun and the ability to use it responsibly — a story that also should have scored big headlines but didn’t.

That’s a shame for Arizona (where, contrary to our image, not everybody is walking around with an assault-style rifle at the ready). And it’s a missed opportunity, given our ongoing fistfight over guns.

Because this story is a place where all the various combatants could perhaps find some common ground.

Cynthia, a 47-year-old widow, realized that somebody was trying to break into her west Phoenix home early one morning in May. She didn’t panic, didn’t back down and
she didn't go all Rambo either.
Instead, she simply defended herself. She called 911, she armed herself with a gun she knew how to use and she retreated to the bathroom rather than confronting her intruder, hoping that help would arrive in time but knowing that if it didn't, she would just have to provide her own rescue.

The 911 tape, released last week, provides a chilling account of her encounter with Michael Lewis, 20, as he first sought entry through the front door, then used a weeding tool to break the glass in her backyard Arcadia door.

“They’ve tried my front door, my front door, and now they’re trying to break in my back gate ...,” a frightened Cynthia tells the 911 operator at one point. “I have a gun in my hands. I’m terrified.”

Later, “Somebody is in the back on my porch.” And then, “Please hurry, please!” as the operator assures her that help is on the way.

“They’re coming out as fast as they can,” the operator says. “Have you heard any voices?”
Cynthia: “Hurry, hurry! They’re coming in right now, please, please, please, please!”

But the police weren’t coming quickly enough. Lewis broke into the bathroom and started attacking Cynthia. So she shot him.

Lewis: “Ow! (Expletive.) What was that? What was that? What was that? (Expletive) did you do?”

Her answer was classic. “Did you think you could beat me half to death?”
Lewis: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry ...”
Cynthia: “You bet you’re sorry you nasty thing.”

Lewis was hospitalized for a month. He has pleaded guilty to burglary and aggravated assault and will be sentenced later this month, and when he gets out, maybe he’ll think twice about breaking into someone’s home.

As for Cynthia, she told police that her late husband taught her how to handle her .38. Good for him, and really good for her.

Curiously, the gun-toting doc at the airport and the little girl with the Uzi were big news, but the story of a widow and an iron will registered barely a blip.

And we lost a chance to find that rarified earth called common ground. It’s a shame, really.
Without sinners, who would buy at stores?

The Arizona economy tanked over the weekend as thousands of companies closed their doors, gave up the ghost and went out of business.

This, in the name of religious liberty.

Once they considered whom their religious convictions would allow them to serve, it seems they had no customers left.

Christians across the state applauded the economic devastation, saying it is a good and noble thing not only to walk in the name of the Lord but to serve as his judges here on Earth.

They are praying that Gov. Jan Brewer will sign Senate Bill 1062, allowing individuals and business owners to refuse someone service if it violates their “sincerely held” religious beliefs.

It is, they say, a matter of conscience, a matter of freedom and tolerance. It’s a matter of their right to act upon their beliefs when it comes to baking cakes or supplying flowers or catering the weddings of same-sex couples.

Or, presumably, selling them groceries or renting them rooms or dry-cleaning their clothes.

“SB 1062 is about religious people saying ‘No’ to an abomination,” wrote Tom, in an e-mail responding to my Saturday column about the bill.
“Christian business owners here are conscientious objectors,” wrote Nolan, of Flagstaff. “The government has no right to force believers to participate in a heresy against their most sacred rites.”

“All this law is for, is for people like me to be free from being forced to accept the beliefs of others,” wrote Daniel. “It’s about making tolerance a two-way street.”

“I am not a Bigot, I love all people, but I do not love their sin nor can I condone it,” wrote Rosalie, of Mesa. “I hope the Legislature has enough backbone to encourage some much needed morality.”

Me? I just wish the Legislature would fund public education, fix Child Protective Services and go home.

A caller named Joy disagreed and suggested that I get out my Bible. “You anti-Christian people,” she said. “If you want to know what God thinks about homosexuals, read 1 Corinthians. I am tired of having homosexual activity shoved down my throat. I do not approve of it. I would not mistreat them, but I do not want to be around them. And I would not hire one. I would not work with one. I do not want to be around them. Their way of life is repulsive. It is abnormal, and most Christians will never accept that way of life, and God does not, either. Read the Bible, Laurie, before you start calling that bill a vile bill. It is protecting the Christians.”

“I didn’t realize that Christians needed protecting. Or that you had to embrace someone’s way of life to bake them a cake. So, I took Joy’s advice and pulled out my King James Bible to read 1 Corinthians.

Turns out there’s a vast array of sinners we Christians — and, yeah, Joy, I consider myself one, though a most imperfect one — should be shunning.

There are the fornicators, the idolaters and the adulterers. There’s the “effemi-nate,” which I took to mean homosexuals, and the “abusers of themselves with mankind,” whoever they are. Prostitutes, maybe? There are the thieves, the greedy, the drunks, the swindlers and the verbally abusive.

Add in people who use birth control (if you’re Catholic), people who are divorced and those who don’t keep the Sabbath — and who’s left that I could sell a ham sandwich to?

I understand that Cathi Herrod and the Center for Arizona Policy are in a tizzy about a couple of lawsuits in a couple of states where judges have ordered businesses to get to baking, photographing, etc.

But it hasn’t been a burning issue in Arizona, and even if it were, it’s one that’ll inevitably wind up before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Couldn’t we let some other state bear the legal costs this time? If not, could we at least agree to be consistent? That if you’re, say, a Christian who bakes wedding cakes for a living, then you should not be able to pick and choose among your “sincerely held” religious beliefs.

I suggest a Let Them Eat Somebody Else’s Cake Checklist, wherein you decline to provide the goods to couples:

1. If either person has been divorced (unless said divorce is sanctioned according to Matthew).
2. If a believer is marrying an unbeliever.
3. If the couple have had premarital sex.
Or 4. If they’ve committed any of the multitude of sins listed in 1 Corinthians.

Won’t that be good for business?

But if a belief is sincere, then surely it should also be consistent. This should be, as some Christians have told me, about loving the sinner and hating the sin.

All of the sins.
Remembering loss is key to change

One year ago today, Arizona burned. Then it bled.

The land was overrun by fire, and our hearts? Well, they were overrun, too.

In an instant, 19 good men gone.

I imagine you remember where you were that Sunday evening when you heard about the Granite Mountain Hotshots. At my house, dinner was on the stove — spaghetti and meatballs — and I had just turned on the TV when the bulletin flashed onto the screen: 18 wildland firefighters killed in Arizona. Soon, we would learn it was 19.

There was disbelief and hope that maybe somehow the reporters had gotten it wrong. Please, God, let them have gotten it wrong.

They hadn’t. It was the deadliest day for U.S. firefighters since 9/11 and the deadliest ever in Arizona.

Across the state, there was zero containment of emotion those first hours and days as people struggled to grasp the loss of these hotshots.

By noon on Monday, people stood in the blistering sun outside the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s office, quietly awaiting the arrival of the men’s remains.

“They were on the front lines, and they paid a price for us,” Isadore Boni, a member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, told me that day. “This is my way of saying...”
thanks.”

“I just feel bad for their families,” Dolores Rosales said, her voice thick with emotion. “So many young men.”

So many young men. Their average age was 27. The youngest were 21.

Most of us had never before heard of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, but we learned quickly what manner of men they were — the toughest of firefighters who took on the toughest of duty: wildfires.

Even the word elicits fear. It is the most dangerous and unpredictable of work, where life can turn on the shift of the wind and the shape of the land.

Or, on that awful late June afternoon, 19 lives.

Seven were fathers. Three were about to be.

Some were the sons of firefighters, and others were Marines, including at least one who had survived a war. One had been a youth pastor. One was getting married in October.

The loss of any one of them would have been too many, but 19? It was a punch to the gut then and still is today.

Yet one year later, we’re no closer to honoring their sacrifice in the way that we must: by seeing to it that these men died not just to protect property, but for something bigger.

One year later, we haven’t seriously addressed what we’re doing wrong. For a decade, wildfires have ravaged the West, becoming more intense and more unpredictable, yet budgets to prevent them have gotten smaller.

One year later, crews are still dispatched to fight these monsters with no way to track them.

Young men are still sent into the flames where their last hope — a tent made out of not much more than foil — is too often no hope.

One year later, our Legislature has done nothing to ensure that never again will men be sent into harm’s way in the manner of the Granite Mountain Hotshots. That going forward, men such as these, who work as a unit and die as a unit, will be treated in death as a unit.

And so, one year later, the watchword is simply this: Remember.

Remember how you felt when you heard the news of 19 good men gone.

Remember the voices across Arizona,
quavering in disbelief and grief, and remember the blow upon blow as we learned a little about these men who answered the call and went willingly into the fire.

Remember the sight of 19 white hearses in that solemn 100-mile procession up the hill to Prescott, taking the fallen home.

Remember and make a vow that the lightning that ignited this hideous firestorm will also ignite change, to better protect our forests and wildlands, and the men and women who fight for them, sometimes with their lives.

“We are not nameless or faceless,” Eric Marsh, leader of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, wrote shortly before the start of the 2013 fire season. “We are not expendable, we are not satisfied with mediocrity, we are not willing to accept being average, we are not quitters.”

Today, as a year ago, our hearts lie on Yarnell Hill.”