

Small town values are what we need now

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Small towns are great communities. They come together in times of trouble, disaster and death. Just like families.

So it was nearly 20 years ago when I lived in Rifle, Colorado, a city of around 6,000 people at the time. The night before Independence Day 2001, Rifle was rocked by the senseless shootings of seven Latino residents by a white man with a long history of mental illness. Four of the victims died.

Steven Michael Stagner, then 42, did not know any of his victims, who ranged in age from 17 to 44. The tragedy was national news for a while.

I was reminded of something that happened days later while watching and reading about recent Black Lives Matter protests that engulfed the U.S. and spread worldwide after the Memorial Day death of George Floyd, a Black man, because a white Minneapolis, Minn., police officer knelt on his neck for nearly eight minutes until Floyd died.

Most of the media focus on the protests was the violence between protesters and law enforcement officers, along with property damage caused by some protesters. None of that happened in Rifle.



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What did happen was a community walk and rally five days after the shootings that brought the community together, white and Latino. I felt something unique and special that night, walking down Rifle's main street next to people I didn't know. It was a human connection that should be there all the time but is too often lacking.

It felt like the community was a family, supporting each other at a terrible time. After reaching a city park, we listened to the usual lineup of speakers: community and Latino leaders, politicians and respected citizens. They all said the right things and I'm sure they meant them.

But racial issues such as prejudice and bigotry do not fade easily. The day Stagner was found not guilty by reason of insanity in 2002 and sentenced to the Colorado Mental Health Institute's forensic unit in Pueblo for a day to life, another community gathering to explain the ruling to the Latino community brought out tensions and claims of injustice.

In 2010, I was among a handful of residents who solemnly stood and listened to short speeches and recollections of the victims as a small memorial bench with the names of the victims was dedicated at Rifle's Catholic church, which many of the victims attended.

After a decade in the Pueblo mental health facility, Stagner was granted permission under more than a dozen conditions to take periodic supervised outings.

Fast forward a decade and I read in Rifle's weekly newspaper of what seemed to have been a rally similar to the one in 2001, this time for racial equality and police reform, on the same street the community walked in solidarity 19 years earlier. Nothing violent occurred this time either.

I don't mean to portray Rifle as a community superior to all other towns and cities grappling with these issues. It has its problems like every other place, including racial and economic inequality.

My hopes and wishes are that the feeling of community I and other Rifle residents felt that 2001 night is something we as a country and world can experience together. To help get past systemic racial inequalities, stop seeing superficial physical and cultural differences and treat each other with the respect and kindness everyone deserves. And that those changes become part of our worldwide culture.

Easy words to write and say. But this time, maybe truly lasting change for the betterment of everyone happens.

Just like a community.