

Love conquers hate as locals walk together for peace

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We applaud the men, women and children who met at the Morgan Hill Community and Cultural Center, then strolled the sidewalks of downtown in the Walk for Peace and Prayer Vigil Aug. 19. The demonstration of community that sunny Saturday afternoon served to remind us all that the right way to counter violence and hate is to rally for reason and compassion.



Photo by Elizabeth Mandel

Clergy from 16 religious organizations of the Interfaith Community of South County quickly organized the event to show people of Morgan Hill, Gilroy and San Martin will stand together to uphold the valued virtues of our American heritage. Many of the participants carried signs and banners proclaiming their belief in what is good and true about America. Even though we Americans live in a multicultural and pluralistic society, we all share a common humanity. When we as a people forget that fact, we risk the rise of tyranny controlling our nation.

There is a painful irony the events in Charlottesville began at the University of Virginia. The esteemed institution was founded by Thomas Jefferson. His Monticello home sits on a mountain a 15-minute drive away. Jefferson would be shocked his place of learning became a place of intolerance when members of various hate groups rallied Aug. 11 and 12 to divide Americans.

Despite higher aspirations, hate has long been a part of the American DNA. We have a heritage of inhumanity. Many of our Founding Fathers including our first President George Washington owned men, women and children kept in bondage to labor on plantations. The ownership of slaves includes Mr. Jefferson, the man who penned the foundational American philosophy that "all men are created equal."

Turn the pages of our history and you'll see there is much violence and injustice done by our leaders toward our people. The Native Americans were viewed as "vermin" by our federal government and many state governments, pests to be cleared from the land for white settlers. Andrew Jackson in the 1830s began a policy of Indian removal in the southern states which led to the Trail of Tears. Soldiers forcefully removed tens of thousands from their homeland.

Following the Civil War, black citizens faced daily mistreatment by Jim Crow's social divisions and exclusions. In 1882, the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which prohibited immigration from China. It tore apart Chinese families and made finding jobs harder for people of Chinese heritage. Even people with European ancestry have been targeted by bigots. At points in our past, the Irish, Germans and Italians in America have faced violence and hate. There has also always lurked in the uglier nature of our American society the prejudice of anti-Semitic views. These continue today as was clearly demonstrated in the chants of white supremacists carrying tiki torches in Charlottesville that eerily paralleled the militant Brownshirts of Germany.

Anti-semitism was shown by President Franklin D. Roosevelt June 4, 1939, when he refused to allow the ship S.S. St. Louis to dock in Florida because it carried 936 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi oppression in Germany. Three years later, Roosevelt signed his infamous Executive Order 9066 which imprisoned 120,000 Japanese-American men, women and children behind barbed wires of internment camps. "National security" were the words used to excuse this display of American racism.

The Mexican-American community has also faced bigotry and racism. During the Great Depression, the United States government sponsored a Mexican Repatriation program with a goal of pressuring men, women and children to move to Mexico. Many were deported against their will. More than 500,000 were deported, with an estimated 60 percent of them United States citizens.

In the 21st century, Americans are still targeted and receive unfair treatment because they belong to certain groups. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, followers of Islam found themselves facing prejudice and intolerance from their fellow Americans.

The recent events in Charlottesville serve as a warning: the American spirit is not immune to the cancers of hatred and bigotry. If left unchecked, they metastasize into violence that leads to a loss of our rights and freedoms.

The neo-Nazis, KKK and other white supremacists seek an America of fascism and division. The people who participated in the Walk for Peace and Prayer Vigil seek an America of democracy and union. Let us here in South Valley join together in our common humanity. Love can conquer hate and peace can overpower violence. We witnessed that fact one recent sunny Saturday afternoon when men, women and children said a prayer and took a walk in downtown Morgan Hill.