

STEPHEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

WORKING TO HEAL DIVISIONS IN THE RE-UNITED STATES

If your mother was like mine, you were told to “make nice” when you were growing up. It was your mom’s way of making sure you behaved in a polite or friendly manner.

Lately, it seems, a lot of Americans aren’t ready to make nice.

Even amid calls for unity in the country — the theme of President Joe Biden’s inaugural speech — there’s scant agreement about what unity looks like. Neither Democrats nor Republicans are ready to take a unity pledge. It’s not even clear that many people want to be unified with their fellow Americans.

But political differences are just the tip of the iceberg, symptomatic of our larger and deeper divisions — according to race, religion, economics, geography and gender. The Democratic and Republican labels provide cover for a profound brokenness in our country.

That revelation came to David and Erin Leaverton during a 50-state journey with a simple mission: meet and talk to Americans about what matters in their lives.

It’s a method that’s very familiar to me as a longtime mediator — to resolve disputes, begin by looking at underlying interests.

The family sold their home in Dallas bought an RV and traveled across the country with their three small children, hoping to listen and learn how to heal what divides us. A former Republican strategist, David Leaverton regretted his contributions to our toxic political climate.

The Leavertons are featured in a new documentary, “The Reunited States,” executive produced by political commentator Van Jones and Meghan McCain, co-host of “The View.” The movie — which airs on CNN this month — was inspired by Mark Gerzon’s early-2016 book, “The Reunited States of America.” The National Conflict Resolution Center is a promotional partner.

The couple came face to face with an uncomfortable realization: that divisions are borne of a belief that certain people have more value than other people. The Leavertons saw the consequences of this thinking when they visited

a Navajo Indian reservation in New Mexico. There, they met a man who described the grim living conditions, with little in the way of opportunity but rampant crime, alcohol and contamination from uranium mines, the last of which were closed in the late 1990s.

In Oklahoma, Erin Leaverton was profoundly touched by her conversation with a Black woman who told her, “I don’t like White people.” She went on to explain her experience in a hospital emergency room: Left unattended and in distress for several hours, she prematurely delivered her baby. The infant died. The woman believes she was ignored because she was Black, unwed and poor. As a mother herself, Leaverton was brought to tears as she processed the painful reality of a life needlessly lost due to disparate care.

“The Reunited States” also features Susan Bro, whose daughter Heather Heyer was killed when a car mowed down counter-protesters at the infamous Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally in 2017. Bro has embarked on a quest for social justice in her

daughter’s name, to reduce hate crimes in our country. She is practically apologetic about the attention paid to Heyer, a White woman, especially as Black Americans continue to be killed by police. Bro travels the U.S. urging people to have difficult conversations about race and better understand the subject, so hearts and minds can change.

The movie sparks optimism. There are indeed people around the country who are trying to promote reconciliation and mend divisions. To genuinely make nice, they realize, the hard work starts with listening to the other side.

Still, I wonder if the task of transformational change will fall to the next generation. That’s the premise behind the Millennial Action Project (MAP), a bipartisan organization founded in 2013 whose mission is to support young leaders committed to countering polarization in our country. MAP’s founder and CEO, Steven Olikara, is also featured in “The Reunited States.”

The group was formed out of a deep concern about the country’s

direction and a belief that the next generation of leaders has the potential — and the urgency — to change course. MAP works directly with young policymakers on both a national and state level to identify and promote innovative policy solutions to issues affecting younger Americans. The group’s 1,500 members have advanced legislation on critical matters, including entrepreneurship, technology, skills training, immigration and volunteerism.

Olikara was inspired in part by Robert F. Kennedy, who was fond of pointing out that the generation with the fewest ties to our country’s past has the greatest stake in its future. If they are indeed motivated to do more than engage in political battles, our young people may finally restore the unity that seems so elusive now.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCR’s programming, visit ncrconline.com.

LOSS

FROM B1
guage class. Over the next 36 years, mostly in North Park, they raised three daughters and welcomed six grandchildren. He owned his own landscaping business and worked full time for 27 years as a maintenance engineer for All Saints Episcopal Church in North Park.

Although he never smoked, the 60-year-old Zapata was diagnosed with Stage 3 lung cancer in early December. A treatment plan was developed, and the family was optimistic of his chances. Then on Dec. 29 — the same day his daughter Brenda went into labor and had a baby — he tested positive for COVID-19. Over the next five weeks, he was in and out of the emergency room and on and off oxygen support. As time passed, his condition gradually declined because of COVID-19 and the unchecked advance of the fast-growing cancer.

“Day after day we waited to hear some good news but that day never came,” daughters Brenda and Lizette said in an email. “He reached a point where his respiratory support was causing more stress to his lungs than it was benefiting him. He wasn’t and couldn’t be ‘himself’ anymore. ... It was painful to accept this as reality, and as much as it hurt us, we knew we had to let him go with dignity. We had to respect his wishes and that’s what he would have wanted at the end.”

The Zapata sisters described their father as a selfless man of integrity who would never ask for financial help. But the medical costs the family is facing are substantial, so they created the GoFundMe page that focused — as he would have insisted — on memories rather than money.

“Our lives will never be the same without him,” the Zapata sisters said. “His love and unyielding support to us was his pride and joy.”

Jayne Mejia

On Dec. 27, Jayne Mejia posted on Facebook a picture of himself wearing an oxygen mask in a hospital bed with the words: “They’re about to put me on life support. I hope I see you all later.” But the Clairemont native never left the hospital or posted again. Fifteen days after writing those words, the 43-year-old father of eight died from complications of COVID-19.

Mejia worked in construction and was the lead singer and songwriter for the local reggae band J.A.M. Kwest, but the most important job in his life was taking care of his wife, Lekicia, and their eight children, ages 7 to 27. Mejia grew up without a father and struggled in his youth with drugs and homelessness. So when he became a dad at a young age, it became his priority to always be there for his family, whether it was to coach their

basketball teams, attend their school events or pay their college tuition.

“He made sure we got everything that he didn’t get,” said son Robert Mejia, 24. “He loved being surrounded by his family and always made sure we got together. Everything he did was for us.”

After Mejia lost his beloved mother to cancer in 2018, he found solace by sharing more of his ups and downs on his Facebook page. In early December, he posted links to new music he was writing and the news that he’d gone to the hospital after getting hit in the head by a tractor on a construction site. Robert said the family believes he may have contracted the coronavirus at the hospital or at a youth sports event the same week.

Beginning with his positive COVID-19 test on Dec. 20, Mejia posted daily on his struggles with body aches, fever and severe headaches, as well as the grim news that nearly everyone in his family had also tested positive. On Dec. 23, he posted a video of himself taken in the middle of the night that shows him wrapped in a blanket struggling to breathe and clearly frightened. Four days later, he was on a ventilator.

Robert said his father gradually recovered from the virus and in early January he was taken off the ventilator, but his body never bounced back. His blood pressure was out of control and, due to his diabetes, his kidneys began to fail. On the morning of Jan. 11, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Mejia was the sole breadwinner for his family. His widow and the five youngest children are now facing the loss of their home. Daughter Aleighna Mejia started a GoFundMe campaign, titled “Father of 8 loses battle to COVID-19,” that has so far raised \$21,500 of an \$80,000 goal. Robert said the money has been a great comfort to his mother in paying for rent and groceries as she looks for work and plans for an uncertain future.

Robert said his father was cremated and the family plans to scatter some of his ashes at a few of his favorite places, like the Clairemont park where he slept during the years he was homeless as a teen and the WorldBeat Center in Balboa Park, where his band played often.

“We’re putting some of him in the little spots that he loved, but we’re going to keep most of them right next to where we keep his mom’s ashes. He would’ve liked that,” Robert said.

Ofelia Barajas

After their mom died from COVID-19 on Feb. 4, siblings Lupita and David Barajas didn’t want to start a GoFundMe page, but some friends offered to create a campaign on their behalf. “In loving memory of Ofelia Barajas” has since raised \$8,700 of a \$7,500 goal to cover funeral costs.

said, Sobczak still has authority to retaliate against him for speaking out.

Two reporters, one from the Union-Tribune and another from the Escondido Times-Advocate, attended the meeting after being invited, but about 20 minutes in, Sobczak ordered all visitors to leave the Legion hall. Then the press was not allowed back inside, a move one post member called unusual.

Reached via text, Sobczak said he would only comment for this story if the Union-



Jayne Mejia with three of his eight children. The former Spring Valley resident who played reggae music died of COVID-19 on Jan. 11 at the age of 43.



Ampelia “Ofelia” Barajas Vasques, 61, died of COVID-19 on Feb. 4.

David, 24, said initially he wished the page didn’t exist, but as the written tributes about his mom poured in, both in English and Spanish, it filled a big hole in his heart.

“She always had friends, very loyal friends, and when they heard about the news, they were devastated. They cared about my mom and about us, and they asked if there was any way they could help,” he said. “Seeing all the beautiful messages is really nice. Seeing how other people also felt that way, it’s a sweet moment, even through all this bitterness.”

Lupita, 25, described her mom, Ampelia “Ofelia” Barajas Vasques as such a popular figure in Logan Heights that everywhere she went in the community people would stop her to say hello and give her a hug. Ofelia and her husband, Onofre Barajas, moved to Logan Heights 27 years ago, and when their children were students at the neighborhood’s Burbank Elementary School, Ofelia was an active volunteer. She became so popular with the faculty and administration, the school offered her a position as the noon-duty assistant, a job she held for the past 18 years.

“She was very joyful and very positive,” Lupita said. “She always had a big smile on her face and was very outgoing. She never let small things get to her, and she had a lot of courage.”

Not long after Christmas, everyone in the family got COVID-19, one by one. Lupita said they have no idea how it happened because they barely left the house except to buy groceries. Onofre, Lupita and David recovered quickly, but then Ofelia began experiencing symptoms that, at first,



Manuel “Manny” Castelan (second from left) with his family. The local restaurant worker, 50, died on Feb. 10 from COVID-19.

seemed like a bad cold. When she started coughing and having severe headaches, she went to the hospital and was admitted on Jan. 8.

Ofelia had been in good health with no underlying health conditions, so her family hoped she’d make a full recovery. Instead, her condition declined. On Jan. 11, she was moved into intensive care where she was placed on a BiPAP machine that pushed air into her lungs. A couple weeks later, she was moved on to a ventilator and she never recovered.

“Our family is not doing well right now, but we’re trying to hang in there and the GoFundMe has helped,” Lupita said. “Everyone is biased and thinks their mom is amazing, but it’s been overwhelming in a positive way to see how much love and support the community has given because they loved her. It validates for us how amazing she really was.”

Juana Chihuahua Sanchez

Over the past year due to the pandemic, Sandy Hanshaw has had to repeatedly shut down her two Point Loma restaurants, The Coffee Hub and The Wine Pub. But on Jan. 21, she temporarily closed them again for a different, but related, reason.

On Jan. 17, the two men who Hanshaw describes as “the backbone of my business,” suffered a terrible loss. North Park residents Ramiro Sanchez, the lead

cook at the Wine Pub, and his son, Axel Sanchez, the kitchen manager for the Coffee Hub, needed time off to grieve. Ramiro’s wife and Axel’s mom, Juana Chihuahua Sanchez, died in a San Diego hospital after a weeklong battle with COVID-19.

Juana, who was in her late 50s, had trouble breathing in early January so she got a COVID-19 test that came back negative. A few days later, she went back to the hospital with symptoms of pneumonia and this time she tested positive. After she was admitted to intensive care and placed on a ventilator, her health teetered up and down day after day. Her family weren’t allowed to visit her bedside, so instead they would gather in the hospital parking lot to pray together. On the day she unexpectedly passed away, Ramiro and Axel were at work and weren’t able to get to the hospital in time to say goodbye.

Hanshaw created a GoFundMe page on behalf of the men, titled “Sanchez family medical expenses,” because while Juana had health insurance it wasn’t the best. So far it has raised \$5,600 toward a \$15,000 goal. Hanshaw said her customers — who have gotten to know and love the Sanchezes over the past five years — have been generous in supporting the effort, which has been used for funeral costs and some of the medical bills.

“Axel and Ramiro were

completely overwhelmed by everyone’s generosity,” Hanshaw said. “If you ask how they’re doing, they say they’re fine because they’re very stoic men. I know they’ll get through it but I know it’s very tough. I can see it in their faces and I know for them it’s not the same as it was.”

Manuel ‘Manny’ Castelan

Manuel “Manny” Castelan would sometimes spend two hours every morning commuting from his home in Tijuana to his job busing tables at Valentina restaurant in Encinitas for four very good reasons: His wife Cecilia and their three children Manuel, Santiago and Rosa.

“He never complained and would happily work double shifts if I asked him. He didn’t do it to buy a new car or take a vacation. He always said he was doing it for his family. He wanted them to have the best,” said Ricardo Zarate, Valentina’s general manager.

Castelan, 50, passed away Feb. 10 after a months-long battle with COVID-19. The next day Zarate created a GoFundMe page in his honor, “Beloved Father Manuel Covid Passing Family Fund.” It has since raised \$5,600 of its \$10,000 goal. All proceeds will go toward Castelan’s family, who have no other means of support.

Zarate and Castelan met several years ago when Zarate was food and beverage manager at the Estancia La Jolla Hotel & Spa and Castelan was working as a buser.

“He was possibly the best damn buser I ever worked with in this industry, so when I came up here to Encinitas I hired him for my staff,” Zarate said. “The guests loved him and he was just a great guy and a good friend. He was also a great father and a great husband. This really hits hard. I’m going to miss him and can’t imagine what his family is going through.”

Born in Veracruz, Mexico, Castelan moved to the U.S. for work and lived for some time in Chula Vista, but as his family grew he relocated to more-affordable Tijuana and commuted daily to restaurant work in San Diego.

Zarate said that Castelan was always a tireless worker, but toward the end of November he began feeling weak and was diagnosed with COVID-19. Hospitalized at an Encinitas hospital in early December, he developed double pneumonia. Doctors placed him on a respirator in a medically induced coma to give his body time to recover. But he never improved and died last week.

“In the restaurant industry, the core of what we do is making other people happy, and Manny was the epitome of that. He always made sure people were taken care of. Now it’s time that people return the favor and take care of his family,” Zarate said.

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LEGION

FROM B1
Tuesday evening was the first full meeting of Post 149 since the story’s publication in early January. The executive committee charged Sobczak with conduct unbecoming a Legionnaire, a member of the board told the Union-Tribune, asking not to be identified. Another committee member confirmed it but provided information about the charge anonymously because, he

said, Sobczak still has authority to retaliate against him for speaking out.

Two reporters, one from the Union-Tribune and another from the Escondido Times-Advocate, attended the meeting after being invited, but about 20 minutes in, Sobczak ordered all visitors to leave the Legion hall. Then the press was not allowed back inside, a move one post member called unusual.

Reached via text, Sobczak said he would only comment for this story if the Union-

Tribune revealed its source. The newspaper declined to do so, and Sobczak did not respond to questions.

If found guilty by a panel of fellow Legionnaires, Sobczak could be removed as commander and expelled from the American Legion altogether, according to the organization’s constitution.

“No person who is a member of an organization which has for its aim the overthrow of the United States Government by force or violence, or who subscribes to the principles of any group opposed to

our form of government, shall be eligible to become or remain a member of The American Legion,” the constitution says.

Jeff Daly, vice commander for the American Legion in California, declined to respond to questions about Sobczak’s case, saying the organization must keep a distance while local leadership works through the issue.

According to a member of the executive committee, Sobczak was issued a summons Tuesday to appear at a

hearing on March 16 to enter a plea on the charge of conduct unbecoming a Legionnaire. At that time, a trial board will be selected to review evidence, and the post will conduct a trial sometime afterward, the committee member said.

News about Sobczak’s Proud Boys membership has tarnished the American Legion in the eyes of some members, the committee member said.

“It’s ruined attitudes across the Legion in California — we have members who

have already left,” he said. Our post “has been losing members — 100 since November.”

Post 149 has more than 800 members, the committee member said, but up to 150 of them have not renewed their membership.

Regardless of the trial results, the post will have a regularly scheduled leadership election, with nominations beginning in April and the election in May, according to members.

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