

A PATH FORWARD Steven P. Dinkin

# ESCALATING CONFLICT A BLIGHT ON PARK EXPERIENCE

A couple of weeks ago, I gave the keynote speech at the California Park & Recreation Society conference here in San Diego. More than 1,600 park and recreation professionals from around California attended. Most of them interact with the public daily.

I was invited to speak because conflict, as it turns out, is as common in parks today as bugs.

Yet our lives are so enriched by parks. We visit them to connect with nature, to hike or swim, to gather with family and friends. The trees alone have tremendous benefits, cooling us and purifying the air. At a park, our identity and beliefs don't matter.

Visitor misbehavior has a way of upsetting that idyllic image (and park employees, too). It started during the pandemic, when enjoying the great outdoors was one of the few things we were allowed to do. For some, it signaled permission to exercise their rights in whatever way they wanted.

Last November, Washington Post travel writer Hannah Sampson offered a list of the eight ways

to be the "absolute worst" park visitor. While some of the misbehavior she described was national park-specific (like hitting a golf ball into the Grand Canyon), the list also included things that are happening in parks up and down our state: people disturbing wildlife, leaving their garbage behind, going off-trail and trampling park grounds, and driving carelessly.

While disappointing, the misbehavior is unsurprising. After all, parks are a microcosm of society — and we are living in a time of rampant entitlement and disregard for others. If you've been to a park lately, you may recognize some of the mischief on Sampson's list.

But who would have imagined that pickleball would become a contentious issue? Last year, the Union-Tribune ran a story about a battle between pickleball and tennis players over scarce parkland in San Diego, which "escalated into shouting matches at crowded public hearings, closed-door meetings at City Hall and accusations of unethical behavior by both sides."

The topic of my CPRS speech was "Handling Challenging Conversations with a Polarizing Public." I shared three principles that are foundational to the training we do at the National Conflict Resolution Center. The acronym we use is ART: active awareness, respond respectfully and troubleshoot together.

Much of what I talked about that morning is useful for all of us in our daily lives.

Understanding (and owning up to) your personal biases is an essential part of active awareness. Bias can get in the way of identifying a person's underlying needs. Imagine a tree: the trunk, the branches, the leaves. It's what people talk about when they are dissatisfied — their gripes. Below ground is what can't be seen — the underlying needs that really matter.

But identifying those needs isn't easy, especially in a quick interaction. One sure way of "blowing it" is using phrases that escalate. The audience laughed (uncomfortably) as I went through

the list, no doubt finding it familiar: "Come here! Calm down! Do you know what you did wrong? You can't do that! I'm not going to say this again!"

Don't parents utter these very phrases to their kids, and with varying levels of effectiveness? No wonder they fall flat when used by park employees, often at the worse time — when emotions are high and judgment is low.

Rather than giving a command, successful conflict resolution requires the opposite action: to pay attention and listen actively. It's at the core of responding respectfully and helps people calm down. It also builds trust. Active listening is a skill all of us could stand to sharpen, to improve our interactions at work, in community and even at the dinner table.

The "T" in ART — troubleshoot together — begins with telling your perspective in a nonconfrontational way, while genuinely searching for shared solutions. With that effort, the exchange can end on a positive note.

That was a lot to take in, so I

ended my talk with George Thompson's "Five Universal Truths." Thompson was the creator of a training program in tactical communication called "Verbal Judo."

- All people want to be treated with dignity and respect.
- All people would rather be asked than told what to do.
- All people want to know why they are asked or told to do something.
- All people would rather have options than threats.
- All people want a second chance to make matters right.

These truths hold for everyone. So, if your summer plans include a visit to one of California's beautiful parks, the employees will be grateful if you keep them in mind.

Your visit will be a walk in the park.

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 NCRC's programming, visit [ncrconline.com](http://ncrconline.com)

## FIGHT

FROM B1 to protect the structures, he said. Or they would patrol the area, unarmed.

A report by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict said that when the Estonian parliament was once occupied by pro-Soviet Russians, tens of thousands of Estonians had the place surrounded within hours.

Koch didn't feel scared. It just felt like the thing to do. Looking ahead, he figured his future would somehow involve rebuilding his homeland.

It was around this time that a family friend threw out a suggestion: Would Koch like to study in the United States? The friend offered to cover the cost.

Sometime after that conversation, in a home on a different continent, a phone rang.

Harry Seifert picked up. Seifert was a firefighter living with his wife and three kids in Julian. On the other end was a voice with a thick Eastern European accent. The man said he was part of a program called World Experience and asked if Seifert was ready to choose which foreign exchange student would be moving in.

Here's the thing: Seifert has no memory of agreeing to host an exchange student. He wondered if someone signed him up as a prank. His wife, Leslie, does remember discussing the program and thinks they must have at least shared their number.

Nonetheless, in that moment, Harry Seifert thought: What the hell.

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Two people brought a folder to the Seifert home filled with black-and-white photos of potential students.

Seifert spotted one handwritten name that read, "Bent Julian Koch."

The couple thought, The kid's middle name is the same as our town? We gotta go with him.

They were wrong. Koch's middle name is "Juhan." The handwriting was just hard to read.

But the misread name that came from a left-field call was enough to get Koch a Pan Am ticket for the United States.

Things immediately went awry.

First, there was the attempted coup.

Koch was supposed to get on a plane in August 1991. That was around the time

hard-liners in the Soviet Union, upset over reforms eroding communist control, seized President Mikhail Gorbachev in Crimea and tried to take over the government.

The plot soon collapsed, but it appeared to successfully delay Koch's flight by several weeks.

When he finally landed in New York, his 90-minute layover stretched to two hours, then three. Koch's pretty sure a catering truck had backed into the plane, punching a hole in the aircraft.

They finally took off after eight hours — but San Diego's airport had closed for the night and Koch was diverted to Los Angeles.

By the time he finally shook hands with his host family, Koch was wiped.

In Estonia, pointing your TV antenna toward Finland could pick up episodes of "Dallas," so Koch had some exposure to American media. But the biggest shock of his arrival wasn't so much cultural as geographic. Estonia's highest point is just 318 meters, shorter than the peaks in Mission Trails, and one of Koch's first memories is the awe he felt driving toward East County's Cuyamaca Mountains.

The plan was for him to stay only a short period.

He spent a year at Julian Union High School, graduated in 1992 and then headed back to Estonia.

It was just in time to enjoy its newfound independence.

The country had formally broken away the previous year in what's sometimes called "The Singing Revolution."

Paavo Koch, the younger brother, remembered the crowds that would gather to belt out patriotic songs in defiance of dictatorship. One punk tune from that era, "Hello Perestroika," included the lyric:

*Milits ja punkar sõbralikult näe  
Ulatavad teineteisele nüüd käe*

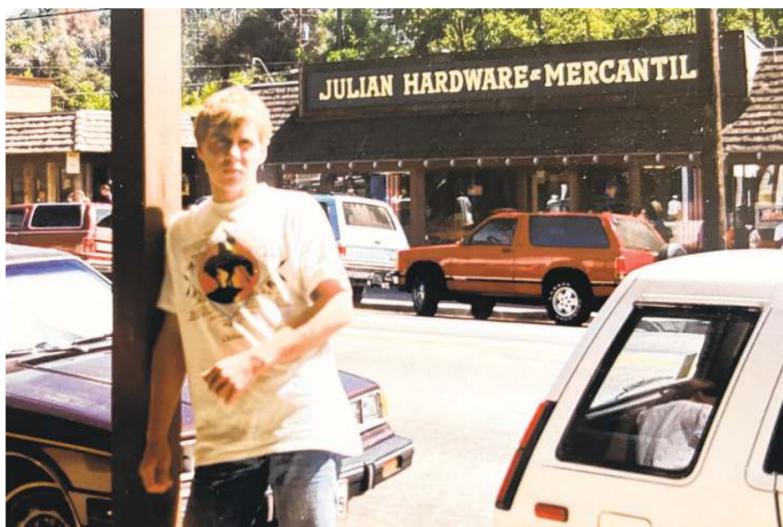
This roughly translates to, "Look, the militia and punks are friendly now, lending a hand to each other."

But Russian troops hadn't yet left and local universities were in tumult over what Koch called a "Soviet-era hangover."

He applied to schools in the United States, got into one in Arizona and got back on a plane.

Things immediately went awry.

This time, funding didn't come through, so he moved back in with the Seiferts and



BRAD ROMAINE

**Bent Koch first lived in Julian as an exchange student. He spent a year at Julian Union High School and graduated in 1992.**



TOM BROWN

**A photo of a snapshot shows Koch in his firefighting gear before he became chief of the Heartland Fire and Rescue Department.**

got a job as a ranch hand.

Harry Seifert assumed Koch would eventually go to medical school. He could have certainly cared for a range of patients: In addition to English, Koch speaks Estonian, Finnish, Russian and a healthy amount of Swedish.

But Koch was thinking about his host dad's career.

He first volunteered for the Julian Cuyamaca Fire Protection District, which gave him a pager.

Whenever it would go off, emitting a series of Morse code-like beeps, he knew a building was likely in danger. Then he was out the door.

It didn't occur to him that

carrying the pager was a different version of what he'd done as a teenager, listening to a radio for calls for help.

He just knew he liked it.

The final hook came during a training exercise. Koch stood inside a burning shed while an instructor named Steve Swaney, who would later become fire chief for much of East County, narrated the blaze's behavior. How it moved. Why it moved.

The conversation helped transform how Koch thought about the job. Chasing fire wasn't just an adrenaline rush. It was intellectually engaging.

He signed up for the academy.

One of the first people he met was Todd Nelson, a fellow student and reserve firefighter.

Nelson was struck by how carefully Koch spoke. While Nelson was used to, in his words, asking the "irritating question," Koch seemed prone to asking the "smarter question." Even today, Koch's speech isn't defined by an accent so much as careful deliberation.

When Nelson later got a job at the California Department of Forestry, or CalFire, supervisors asked if there were others from the academy they should hire. Nelson said he knew a guy.

By 1998, Koch was working for the fire department in La Mesa. That city later joined El Cajon and Lemon Grove to form the Heartland Fire and Rescue department, which now serves all three.

The job has changed over the years.

Medical emergencies are up. Blazes are bigger. Nelson recalled driving around with Koch in Northern California in 2017, after the North Bay fire, when the scale of what they were facing hit home. In neighborhood after neighborhood, all they could see were chimneys.

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Koch became a U.S. citizen in 2000.

The experience of moving to a new country was on his mind while earning a master's degree in emergency services administration from California State University in Long Beach.

In a 2016 thesis, he zeroed in on El Cajon's Chaldean community. Refugees were not being given enough in-

formation about how the 911 system works and first responders were ineffectively trained on the specific needs of new arrivals, he found.

"These communication gaps are exemplified by several on-scene misunderstandings," Koch wrote, "which often required police assistance to maintain emergency scene control."

When his old instructor Steve Swaney retired as Heartland's chief last year, the three city managers chose Koch as the successor. He was sworn in Jan. 10, a little before his 49th birthday.

Koch's home country has similarly redefined its role in the world.

Estonia joined NATO and the European Union in 2004, one of only three former Soviet states to join both organizations, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service. It held its most recent parliamentary elections last month.

Both Koch and his homeland were deeply affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Tens of thousands of Ukrainians have poured into Estonia, which has accepted a larger share of refugees than any other European Union country, an International Monetary Fund analysis found. Koch said he's been supporting several organizations helping the region, including the World Kitchen.

"Estonians, for the most part, have never felt fully safe," Koch said.

The threat had never really gone away.

Years ago, when Koch was serving as a firefighter for both La Mesa and Julian, a blaze almost destroyed his home.

He was married at the time, living in Julian with three children, when flames swept through his neighborhood.

Koch was one of dozens to rush in. He grabbed his chainsaw and began cutting down a fence at risk of igniting. Others sprayed the ground with hoses. They threw drywall up against windows to keep glass from shattering.

Time seemed to warp. The whole experience felt like 15 minutes, but it could have taken much longer.

Koch lost part of the fence. The neighbor's house took some scorching. But the two homes, and his family, were safe.

Then they got word that the fire had shifted, and another area was at risk.

The crew took off.

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## SMOLENS

FROM B1 page special section that delve into the myriad institutional and personal struggles of dealing with mental health problems.

For three days, reporters followed patients, police, clinicians, dispatchers and those in need of help, taking a granular look at an overwhelmed system. The project was titled "72 Hours Inside San Diego County's mental health crisis" — a reference to the length of time California law allows a patient to be placed on an emergency hold due to mental illness, if they are determined to be a threat to themselves, a danger to others or are "gravely disabled."

"The problem isn't new," says the introductory story, "but only in the past few years has it burst into the public consciousness in a way that's forced elected officials to pledge more and

more time and money toward a fix.

"Yet, by any metric, the situation is worsening."

Struggles with mental illness and providing treatment for it are by no means solely a regional concern, though San Diego and California may have their own unique circumstances.

Personal experiences might make the problem more relevant to those who are not experiencing serious psychological issues or are not familiar with people who do. That, in turn, might bring more pressure to bear on fixing the system.

Historically, politicians tend to try to hide flaws and often don't reveal health issues.

Yet several members of Congress and other politicians have come forward in recent years to talk about their own mental health struggles, particularly after Fetterman acknowledged his.

It stands to reason some

members of Congress have experienced mental illness. One in five Americans will have some form of mental illness in a given year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

One in 25 will live with serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or major depression.

There are 435 members of the House of Representatives and 100 U.S. senators.

Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn., wrote an essay shortly after Fetterman checked into Walter Reed National Military Medical Center that discussed her depression as a teenager and then as a mother in her 30s. She first publicly revealed her experience in 2019.

"That's my story. Really, it's the story of millions of Americans," Smith said on the Senate floor four years ago as she pushed for mental health funding. "But I chose to share mine ... because I want to urge anyone who

struggles with depression — or anxiety, or substance abuse, or post-traumatic stress disorder, or any other mental health issue — to reach out and seek help.

"But destigmatizing and demystifying mental illness is just the beginning."

Jason Kander, a former secretary of state of Missouri and a rising star in the Democratic Party, ran for U.S. Senate in 2016, but narrowly lost to Republican incumbent Roy Blunt. He then ran for Kansas City mayor and quickly became the favorite, but dropped out seven months before the 2019 election when he revealed he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression following his military service in Afghanistan.

"I announced that I was leaving public life for a while to go get help ... now I'm a public person again, and I'm trying to be that role model as best I can," Kander, now a national official with the

Veterans Community Project, told Politico.

"But there's a difference between that next level of what John Fetterman is doing," Kander said. "I'm aware of the social media comments that are like, 'Oh, whatever happened to that guy after he made that announcement?' And that's fine, but it's really great that in the case of John Fetterman (and others) ... people see, 'Oh, they made this announcement, and their pursuit continued.'"

In 1972, Sen. Thomas Eagleton, D-Mo., rocked the country when he admitted he received electroshock therapy for clinical depression in the 1960s. That forced him to withdraw as the running mate to presidential candidate George McGovern, the South Dakota senator.

In those days, vice presidential background checks were said to be comparatively superficial compared with what takes place today.

Eagleton hid his mental health history from McGovern and was criticized for it, while the debacle raised questions about McGovern's abilities and judgment.

To what degree that played a role in McGovern's landslide loss to incumbent Richard Nixon was long debated, but nobody suggests that was the cause of defeat.

Yet what is little remembered is that Eagleton was re-elected to the Senate in 1974 with 60 percent of the vote. He then won a third term six years later.

**Tweet of the Week**

Goes to SpaceX (@SpaceX), Elon Musk's rocket and space company.

"As if the flight test was not exciting enough, Starship experienced a rapid unscheduled disassembly before stage separation."

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