

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

OPINION

## Civil liberties require civility to maintain community



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Webster's Dictionary defines civility as "a polite act or expression."

Sorely lacking in our nation's political discourse for some time, polite expressions were nowhere to be seen in Charlottesville, Virginia two weekends ago and remained notoriously missing in action throughout that tragic incident's wake.

Our nation was founded upon the ideals of freedom, including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom to assemble and protest. It's the essence of liberty. The intended goal of a free, constructive arena of debate is to allow all ideas to be tested, ensuring that only the greatest rise to the top and gain broad acceptance.

But those who espouse hate and, more specifically, those who debate and organize rallies for the sole purpose of promoting hatred toward other races or religions — as was the case in Charlottesville — do not share this goal. Their aim is to pour acid into the foundational cracks that already divide our society and incite those who may hold opposing views to vitriolic and sometimes violent anger.

The result is the complete breakdown of both civil discourse and the bonds of community — the polar opposite of what our nation's founders intended.

If the protest organized by neo-Nazis in Charlottesville represented the worst of humanity, then the relatively peaceful rallies in Laguna Beach last weekend serve as a seed of hope.

A rally organized by anti-immigration group "America First" drew nearly 2,500 counter-protestors celebrating inclusion and diversity, outnumbering the ralliers by an estimated 40 to 1. While there were some shouting matches and minor skirmishes, the evening, while tense, was largely peaceful.

This is indeed something to celebrate. Not long ago, Orange County was almost entirely white; now it's home to dozens of races and cultures speaking more than 150 languages. Once staunchly conservative, we're now a growing political battleground. If there was ever a place where economic and racial tensions should theoretically run amok, it's here. But we're charting a different course that holds great promise for our future.

In our roles, we have the privilege of seeing this sense of community in action on a daily basis. We work with many private companies working to expand the base of well-paying jobs while generously funding after-school programs and childhood hunger initiatives. We've seen individuals from Newport Beach working around the clock to serve the needs of homeless residents in Santa Ana. We work side by side with government and non-profit leaders ensuring that more residents have access to quality health care. There's no doubt that Orange County is a giving and caring community.

But we can't rest on our laurels. Continued economic growth, an increasingly diverse and aging workforce and a changing political environment have the potential to foster an atmosphere of divisiveness and anger between the "haves" and the "have nots," red county and blue county — the very environments we've seen rip apart communities in other parts of the country.

That's why it's imperative that we continue welcoming discussion and encouraging debate as we continue planning for the Orange County of tomorrow. But equally important is demanding civil discourse amongst neighbors.

We may hold differing beliefs, faiths and convictions and certainly have the constitutional right to express them. But let's resolve to cherish our differences of opinions, backgrounds and political persuasions. We may come from diverse cultures, speak many languages and promote with pride our respective cities, neighborhoods or schools. But we are one, united Orange County.

This sense of community was best exemplified in the Register's account of two Laguna Beach rally attendees, representing two opposing sides, smiling and hugging when they realized they were both carrying signs with the same word: Love.

*Sue Parks serves as the president and CEO of Orange County United Way, which is uniting Orange County in its fight for the education, health and financial stability of every person in Orange County. Shelley Hoss is president of the Orange County Community Foundation, which inspires a passion for lifelong philanthropy, faithfully stewards the intentions of donors, and catalyzes sustainable community impact.*