Carillon
EDITORIAL

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A stain on Steinbach or a cowardly minority?

It was hard not to feel anything but deep shame for the community of Steinbach last week when it was announced that Steinbach Pride was cancelled after threats of violence were made against the community event.

It's an emotion many Steinbach residents were likely feeling, that sense that we've been here before, that people will assume the community is nothing more than a city of hate, of cowardice and of ignorance.

But it's important to remember that the actions of people who think threatening local events is a justified reaction, do not define us as a community.

Interestingly, while this was going on, many of our elected officials chose to focus their outrage on those who dare criticize Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA who was assassinated while speaking to university students in the U.S.

While it's disappointing that they didn't feel the need to address the major issue happening in their own backyard, their words on Charlie Kirk are surprisingly relevant to Pride and the cancellation.

Take this week's column, On Parliament Hill, written by Provencher MP Ted Falk, for example.

He suggests we live in a culture of "labelling and cancelling".

"If folks label someone with different beliefs than their own, they cancel them," he wrote. That's true and that's exactly the fight the Pride movement has faced since its creation.

Falk also quoted former Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker who said: "I am a Canadian, a free Canadian, free to speak without fear, free to worship God in my own way, free to stand for what I think right, free to oppose what I believe wrong, free to choose those who shall govern my country".

That sentiment, to make any sense at all, must be applied to every one of us.

It's important to realize that the issue here is not whether the Pride movement is a good one. It's not a question of morals, faith or tradition.

While it seems incomprehensible to many that the right to exist for any group is still up for debate, the fact is in a free society we can have whatever opinions we want.

This, however, is an issue of arrogance and cowardice.

When did we get to a place where we believe in our heart of hearts, that everyone else must share our own beliefs?

And how did some of us get to the point where we don't even want to engage, where we'd rather hide in the shadows, make threats and consider that a rational response.

This level of stupidity simply cannot be pervasive in Steinbach. This cannot be Steinbach's defining quality.

When faced with an event or a cause that one doesn't support, there's a couple of logical options.

The most logical of course is simply not to attend. That's the right people exercise every single day multiple times.

Steinbach is home to hundreds of events, causes, clubs and churches.

We all vote with our feet. We support those we like and distance ourselves from those we don't.

Sometimes when one is really opposed to a cause, they try to influence others. That's also a somewhat logical reaction.

But to take matters as far as threatening a group of fellow citizens is reprehensible.

The people responsible for this are not upstanding citizens.

They represent the dregs of society, those who would stoop to violence or threats thereof as the most cowardly response possible.

This is the same type of thinking that led to the death of Charlie Kirk, and Democrat state representative Melissa Hortman and her husband in Minnesota.

There are many things we can do.

Steinbach MLA Kelvin Goertzen urges people to take this on themselves in their personal conversations and in their engagement on social media.

Leadership matters too.

We've seen the hateful rhetoric shared by U.S. President Donald Trump, and the hateful response from NDP Minister of Families, Nahanni Fontaine, although they'd be loath to be included in the same sentence.

But that kind of behaviour exists throughout the political spectrum.

It must end.

But the absence of hate is not enough.

Our political and community leaders need to step up as well.

The days after the cancellation of Pride were a perfect opportunity for our mayor, councillors, MLA, MP and local churches to call out hate, cowardice and ignorance here at home.

There was no need to endorse the goals of Pride in this message.

It would have simply supported free speech, the right to assemble and the right to live our lives free from violence.

Nobody is arguing that all of Steinbach carries the stench of hatred as a result of this. But we could do better by countering the crazies among us if our leadership stands up and speaks out against hate.

-GV



CASSIDY DANKOCHIK *THE CARILLON*

"Even if I knew that tomorrow would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree. – Martin Luther

Political violence threatens us all



Think Again

Michael Zwaagstra

It's the kind of thing no decent person wants to see. Thirty-one-year-old Charlie Kirk was shot in the neck at a public event when he was in the middle of answering a question.

Kirk was a conservative political activist in the United States. But that doesn't really matter. Whether he was a conservative, a liberal, or something else entirely, no one deserves to be shot and killed for expressing an opinion. Because that's what Kirk was doing.

I was also disgusted by the number of people who openly celebrated Kirk's assassination. For example, Manitoba's Minister of Families Nahanni Fontaine shared a social media post condemning Kirk as a "racist, xenophobic, transphobic, sexist white nationalist mouthpiece" and stating, "I extend no sympathy for people like that."

Only after experiencing significant public blowback did Fontaine issue a perfunctory apology. Frankly, I'm amazed that Premier Wab Kinew is letting Fontaine remain in cabinet. It must be a low bar indeed to remain one of Kinew's cabinet ministers.

One of the defining marks of a healthy democracy is that we settle differences at the ballot box rather than through violence. Instead of killing our political opponents, we vote them out of office. If an election doesn't go the way we want, we start organizing for the next one.

Another important element in a democracy is that we allow people to express their views freely. If we disagree with what someone says, we rebut them with facts and evidence. And if we can't stand listening to someone's misguided opinions, we ignore them. No one is forcing us to watch television shows we don't like, to listen to podcasts that we hate, or to read books that we think should never have been published.

To be honest, I never followed Charlie Kirk that closely. I was vaguely familiar with his Turning Point USA organization, but I didn't know much about his views other than that he was a conservative activist. From what I've read about Kirk since his death, he sounds like someone who enjoyed dialoguing with people who disagreed with him.

I am deeply concerned by the rising toxicity of political discourse in both Canada and the United States. No doubt social media has played a huge role in this trend since it's become easier than ever for people to isolate themselves in their echo chambers.

One of the best things we can do to resist this trend is to step out of our echo chambers. If you are on social media, try to follow people from a variety of perspectives, not just the people who say the things you like to hear. This will give you a more complete picture of the things happening around you.

Even more important, develop and cultivate friendships with people who disagree with you. Some of my best friends are people who strongly disagree with me about politics and religion. When we get together, we have some interesting discussions, and yes, some heated debates. But most of the time, we aren't arguing with each other. Rather, we just accept that we disagree on some things and have honest discussions about life.

When you become friends with people who disagree with you, it becomes harder to demonize others who think like them. This helps us see the human side of other people. In the end, we realize that the differences aren't always as big as we think.

There's nothing wrong with expressing strongly held views. After all, that's what I do every week in this opinion column. Just remember that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, even when you disagree with them.

Michael Zwaagstra is a teacher and deputy mayor of Steinbach. He can be reached at mzwaagstra@shaw.ca.

The Carillon
News that matters to people in southeastern Manitoba

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