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A healthy community breaks barriers that lead to isolation

By JIM HALE

Our valley is changing.

Signs of economic recovery are blooming like spring cactus flowers.

Community is deepening as students are building relationships with the lonely through an initiative called No One Should Eat Alone.

Bright spots include nonprofits, such as the Joseph Center and Hope of the Grand Valley that are ministering to homeless and struggling families with great effect.

Service clubs support many caring and effective nonprofits like spring rain on dry desert soil. Connect Colorado, an interfaith effort initiated by Gov. John Hickenlooper, is cooperatively reaching out to minister understanding, support and hope to those caught in suicidal thinking.

This last weekend more than 30 churches cooperated in Sharefest Weekend, reaching out in love to hundreds of infirm and aged people needing a little help, from flipping mattresses to building handicapped ramps.

Mesa County commissioners, while issuing a proclamation supporting Sharefest, stated that the group was accomplishing things that government could not do: building relationships, and it is making a difference.

Local businesses like Sutherlands pitched in with significant discounts, making the dollars go farther.

Crime statistics in a portion of Clifton fell deeply as the Mesa County Sheriff's Office did community-building patrols and regional services cooperating with the Mesa County Health Department pursued ways to reach a disenfranchised community.

All this and much more as people in government, businesses, schools, nonprofits and churches engage together in making our valley a difficult place to be lonely.

We have a long way to go. Studies and observations done in the last year by Mesa County and others have come up with one primary community trait: we are a fragmented community.

People feel unified to some degree, but only in isolated groups based on common focus where we feel comfortable. Worst case, some are so isolated as to be without community altogether; they are truly alone.

To be a healthy community we need greater knowledge, respect and appreciation of all our "working parts" to cross over perceived boundaries and establish new relationships. And, through cooperative effort reach the "orphaned" parts of our society.

GVIN-TAKE: Grand Valley Interfaith Network Theological and Knowledge Exchange is a great example. Faith community of all flavors, Christian, both progressive and conservative, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Mormon and atheists are gathering and finding great commonality, even in their profound differences. We are choosing to be different together for the sake of community; intentionally reversing the condition of defensive isolation. In sharing our common hopes and pain we grow in understanding and compassion.

It is a challenging exercise leading toward community service to demonstrate that we can do more than hate, or even uneasily tolerate one another, and work together beyond our borders to promote healthy and diverse community. We all bleed the same.

Breaking down isolation in our community has benefits beyond building healthy relationships; criminal activity thrives in anonymity. When the darkness is lifted by ever-increasing exposure to light, criminal elements feel the need to be somewhere else. Intentional efforts to support this kind of change are functioning in the Clifton and Riverside areas as churches and faith-based ministries operate in an Adopt-a-Block mode. Many great efforts are being made across the board to build positive and accepting community.

Over a year ago, just after a rash of teen suicides, a past county commissioner attended one of our Grand Junction Ministerial Alliance meetings. She looked at us and said, "This is a spiritual problem. What are you doing about it?"

It was certainly a challenging question. We began to pray together, inviting the public to join in. That has grown into a community effort called Transform Our Valley that meets quarterly at Canyon View Vineyard Church Chapel and is attended by people from all walks of life.

The next meeting will be Thursday, July 19 at noon. A light lunch will be provided and education will be the primary focus of the prayer.

Praying together with new people broadens the impact personally and corporately. We are convinced God has the solution to our need. Adopt-a-street and Adopt-a-cop initiatives are taking root. Contact transformourworld.org to join in.

We all have a place in this Grand Valley family. It's time for churches, faith-based organizations, businesses, schools, governments, non-profits and individuals to lay aside defensiveness and deepen appreciation and cooperation. As we step across the borders of our comfortable mini-societies with acceptance and compassion toward others we can, and will, build a truly healthy Mesa County community.

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