

Mothers Took the Lead -- Racial unrest in Anaheim, California, my hometown

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July 2020



Good morning everyone. First of all, of course, my sympathy and condolences to the family of George Floyd and to the people of Minnesota, who have seen everybody in the nation rally around and who quite frankly must be a little confused about how this is playing out on their turf [in their city].

I say that, because in 2012, about the middle of July... I represent my hometown of Anaheim California. I represented it for twenty years in the United States Congress. Anaheim, of course, is known for [the world's first (1955)] Disneyland. We have a lot of lower-paid workers around that area who work at Disneyland, who work at hotels, who work at restaurants associated with tourism. So there are parts of Anaheim that are low-income areas that have been impacted. It's just a difficult life there for people.

In July of 2012, one of our police officers shot a young Latino man. His name was Manuel Diaz. What erupted from that were riots in the City of Anaheim. They were called the Ana Drive Riots because this shooting happened on Ana Drive, a cul-de-sac filled with almost slumlord- condition apartments, where of course, these hardworking people lived. They were very upset that this killing happened at the hands of the Anaheim police. The interesting thing is that word got out, so we ended up having these immense riots for two or three nights in a row.

I will have to say that 80 or 90 percent of the people who were involved in those riots were not even from Anaheim; they actually came from other places. There were fires; there were cars lit on fire. It was not an easy time for our city. I say this because we saw this eight years ago in my city. It was a different backdrop, of course, Orange County California has about a 1.2 percent African- American population, but it has about a 40 percent Latino population. Those Latinos live, mostly in the worst area of our city. They are unemployed or they are underemployed, or they're employed in difficult and low-paying jobs.

I want to say that from that, it was very interesting the several things that we did. First we made a blue-ribbon commission [a group of exceptional people appointed to investigate, study or analyze the problem] that looked into what these officers had done, and we had real results from that. It took about five or six years, to tell you the truth. More importantly, almost immediately, the mothers who lived on Ana Drive began to stand and speak out and tell people who didn't belong there -- who were rioting and who were causing problems -- to get the heck out of their neighborhood and that they would take care of the situation.

It was led by a young mother named Yesenia Rojas. She galvanized all of the mothers in the neighborhood. The other thing she did was start to outreach to the public officials, and we came in and we started to make real, strategic plans about what this community needed. Then, we either put some public funds toward it or I personally picked up the phone and called individual donors to ask them to put money toward some of the programs we needed for the young people in this neighborhood, who just felt despair about everything that was going on.

One of the biggest players we had was the Department of Justice at the federal government level. They sent us two people who were sort of mediators, "community" kind of people, people who knew how to go

out and start working together for the long run to solve some of these issues. They actually lived... They relocated to Anaheim, to these neighborhoods and they lived here for three years, while they involved themselves in the neighborhood and they continued to talk to the leadership of the city and local and federal and state leadership as well as the community to build the types of programs and to build trust back into the neighborhood. It has all been very positive.

Yes, in this George Floyd era we have had a couple of demonstrations in the City of Anaheim. It was interesting... my husband drove down to the center of Anaheim yesterday to visit a friend. He said all of the businesses were boarded up because they are worried about the types of things [destruction, looting] that we have seen on television, happening in New York and LA and other areas. But nothing happened in Anaheim. There were protests. There were marches but they were all very peaceful. In some cases protesters marched hand-in-hand with members of our Police Department from the City of Anaheim. I was very pleased to see that the very difficult work that we had been doing for the last eight years actually paid off in this time of unrest that we've seen around the nation. I will also just add that our clergy were very involved. I attend a predominately African American church in Santa Ana and our pastor went into Anaheim during that time to start working with other churches, with the Catholic Church. I met with the bishop. I said that these are predominantly Catholics living here. We need to invest more in our community from the church perspective, so it was very important for our clergy to be involved at that time in this neighborhood.

So I want to say that we have to look at the positives that come out of some of this strife that we see and we have to actually roll up our sleeves and get in there and involve ourselves in order to make sure that we have a better society, that we learn from what we see and that we move forward. I'm very optimistic that this can happen across the United States. I would like to say one last thing to Dr. Michael Jenkins because I know that his foundations and his group work really quite a bit with Congress members in bringing us together and having a shared vision of what society might look like. I would just like to say, Continue to work on that, because when I turn on the television these days and I see Tim Walz, who is the governor of Minnesota, and I see Keith Ellison, who is the attorney general of Minnesota, and I see so many other people who are on the front line, I know they are all former members of Congress. So what you invest in the Congress will pay many dividends as they move on and go back to their own state and become the leadership for those states. Thank you for having me this morning.

Thomas Walsh: Thank you very much for these appropriate and insightful comments and for bringing again to the fore the role of faith-based organizations and the churches taking initiative and engaging. I am very happy that you mentioned the role of mothers who truly can engage as you indicated. They played a role that is very much constructive in pulling the community together. Every movement or every group, unfortunately, has its "bad apples" or bad actors. Every crisis has opportunities.

On all sides, those that are doing good work will find that there are those that will "get on the train" but who have very different motives and a very different agenda. This is part of the complexity of many social problems. There are people that have taken advantage of the Covid crisis. We need to be watchful about that. Sometimes we use the term "original sin." One thing about that theological concept is that it applies universally. So we have to look at ourselves and also be self-critical of our own institutions.