

**One United Family
#BLACKSHIRTS**



Overcoming the “Mindless Menace of Violence” in Waukesha and Beyond

by Don Paul Browne

Alderman, 1st District, Waukesha (WI) Common Council

As I write this blog, just two days after my oldest daughter, her fellow classmates and fellow students in Waukesha South High survived a school shooting attempt, yet another one that has plagued our nation, I am still numb from the idea that this mindless menace of violence has come to our community.

We are of course grateful to the police, school officials and everyone else who played a role in diffusing what could have been a traumatic event with potentially several casualties, like those experienced at Sandy Hook and at Stoneman Douglas, and at Columbine. But the trauma of Monday’s threat is still there, and the mindless menace of violence still casts its dark shadow over our community, especially over those like my daughter who lived through the events of Monday morning, December 2nd, 2019.

For those of you – especially our young students who may be reading this – the [“Mindless Menace of Violence”](#) was the name of a speech that Robert F. Kennedy gave to the City Club of Cleveland on April 5, 1968 – the day after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. It is considered one of the greatest speeches of the 20th century – perhaps second only to [the speech he gave just one night before to a grief-stricken black neighborhood in Indianapolis](#).

In my darkest days, I have resorted to reading, even hearing these speeches as they have always lifted me back up, reminding me of the possibilities of hope. As a writer and an elected official, I truly believe that the power of words can change the world, and the fact that Indianapolis was the only major American city that did not go up in flames on that awful night in 1968 gives evidence to this belief.

But in the aftermath of the Waukesha South AND North incidents of December 2nd, these words have new meaning for me now. In one regard, I am saddened that the mindless menace of violence has evolved into senseless, random acts by troubled children and young adults more than 50 years after these speeches were given.

Yet, I also believe that these same words could make a powerful impact on our young people – the majority of which have never heard these speeches or could even tell you much about 1968 due to the strong overemphasis on STEM in America’s schools. For many of these students, it is these words that could enthrall them with a sense of identity, a sense of self-worth, and a feeling of empowerment. They

could also shed some light on helping them understand where we grown-ups have failed them as a society. As Kennedy states,

“There is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly as the shot, or the bomb or the knife. This is the violence of institutions, indifference, inaction and decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men...

“But when you teach a man to hate, to fear his brother...We learn at the last to look at our brothers as aliens, alien men with whom we share a city but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling but not in a common effort. We learn to share only a common fear, only a common desire to retreat from each other, only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force. For all this there are no final answers, yet we know what we must do and that is to achieve true justice for all our citizens.”

The unfortunate aspect of this wave of school and random violence in other public places is that the discussion almost always turns to gun control, which only leads to greater polarization. But just as the pen is mightier than the sword, I feel that the power of words – especially those of our great leaders and heroes like Kennedy – can make a far greater impact on building stronger, safer and more connected communities. And it is the simplest words that express friendship, good tidings, and even respect towards one another, can go a long way towards meaningful progress at the local levels. Again, as Kennedy stated on April 5, 1968,

“We cannot banish violence with a program or with a resolution. But we can perhaps remember if only for a time that those who live with us are our brothers (and our sisters), that they share with us the same short moment of life, that they seek as we do nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and in happiness winning what satisfaction and fulfillment that they can.

“Surely, this bond of common faith, surely this bond of common goals can begin to teach us something. Surely, we can learn at the least to look around at those of us our fellow men and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and become in our hearts countrymen again.”

On the night of King’s assassination and in the days that followed, it was Kennedy who proved that even one person can make a difference. And that we’ve got to at least try.

This other type of violence that Kennedy describes was manifested in (what I believe to be) - the suburban sprawl developments that were defined by back porch N.I.M.B.Y.-ism and a desire by many for separation from the “rest of us.” These types of “non-communities” have cost us dearly in traffic issues, reducing our carbon footprint, and alienating neighbor from neighbor - even on the same street. Instead of focusing on guns, let’s turn our attention for a moment to the hammer.

We need to become again a “front porch society” by advocating for the same [“New Urbanism”](#) developments that are becoming more popular across the country. Briefly, New Urbanism is based on human-scaled design principles that call for front porch homes, walkable streets, central common places and other elements that can create intentional communities in urban neighborhoods, existing suburban clusters, and rural main streets.

Knowing that these types of construction projects don’t happen overnight, we need to work with our feet, knocking on doors and becoming better acquainted with our neighbors starting on our street, as well as with the people in the workplaces and lockers around us. There was a trend in my church a few

years ago, and I'm sure many others still practice this today, in which the priest would begin every mass by inviting everyone to introduce themselves to those strangers gathered around them in the pews.

Again, there's no guarantees that we can all be friends, but by being better acquainted with one another, we can identify common strands that could lead to new business opportunities, greater support for each others' causes, and safer schools and communities. As it is cited in *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," those who we are at odds with politically or socially (as is often the case in our school), can become meaningful allies because we are better acquainted when we identify common causes, interests or needs. That person you can't stand in that other clique you disdain might also have a sibling battling cancer, or a father who can't find gainful employment because of his age, or a passion for the same vocation. It is in recognizing the same human struggles and endeavors that we can become a more connected community.

And I can't dismiss STEM entirely, as I have learned that we can harness the power of data and new technologies for good. I have clients who are developing exciting applications that can help organizations improve their inclusion cultures using AI and other exciting tools, perhaps these can be re-purposed for our schools. We can also apply sentiment analysis to our social media not just to identify threats, but to create new opportunities for building more connected communities.

Furthermore, we can use technology to re-introduce our young to the great political, literary, and other scholarly traditions, INCLUDING HISTORY, so that our children can develop stronger identities, get to learn and become their true selves. Through these efforts, we can "demand the qualities of youth" and all work together across generations ["to dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man, and to make gentle the life of this world."](#)

WRITER'S NOTE

For my small part, I have enlisted at least 2 middle school students who are passionate about politics, current events and history to serve as volunteer legislative aides for "my Aldermanic staff." I am also trying to organize some Christmas caroling within the next couple weeks so that we can share some holiday joy with our neighbors - especially those who are elderly and/or have no family close by to share the tidings of the season. Over the last few months we raised money for a memorial tree (thanks to a wonderful program established by Waukesha's Parks, Recreation, & Forestry Department) for a neighbor who passed away last spring, which culminated in a planting ceremony in our neighborhood park that he loved so much. The bonds established from this effort will serve us well in organizing our caroling efforts and other fun future endeavors. All are welcome to join us from near and far - check our my social media pages on [facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) for dates and times.