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Living Up to the Legacy

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

April 10, 2014

Twenty years ago, Billings, Montana set a national standard for community rejection of hatred and bigotry. Almost as one, the community shouted a loud “NO” to ultra-right-wing extremist behavior that was racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic.

The Northwest United Skinheads and, police believed, elements of the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Nation, were equal opportunity bigots, targeting for abuse and intimidation anything that wasn't “white, American and Christian.” Whether you were black, Latino, Indian, Jewish or gay, you were not welcome in their America, or their Billings.

Billings' response was a continuum of courage over many months. Community resistance started with small steps. Initial mainstream reluctance -- suggestions that the problem would simply go away if it were ignored -- caused community leaders of conscience to stand tall. Billings' resistance to hatred and bigotry eventually culminated in a single act of solidarity that was stunning in its simplicity and its strength.

On the night of December 2, 1993, a rock crashed through the bedroom window of 5-year old Isaac Schnitzer during Hanukkah -- a window decorated with the words “Happy Hanukkah,” and a menorah, a dreidel, and a Star of David, all Jewish symbols.

Upon some officials advising the Schnitzers to remove the decorations from their windows, Margie MacDonald, then Executive Director of the Montana Association of Churches and now a State Legislator, couldn't believe that Billings would allow itself to be intimidated by the extremists. Joined by City Council member Chuck Tooley, Police Chief Wayne Inman, the ad hoc Billings Coalition on Human Rights, the Central Labor Council, and many more, including local churches, MacDonald pushed an effort to place small paper drawings of menorahs in windows across Billings in a show of solidarity with the Schnitzers.

Then Billings Gazette Regional Editor David Crisp and Publisher Wayne Schile printed in the paper a full page colored drawing of a menorah with the suggestion that it be hung in windows across the community. Immediately over 10,000 menorahs sprouted up in homes, proudly proclaiming that Billings stood against the bigoted extremism.

What Billings did made me proud, as a Montanan, as an American and as a human being.

In Billings at that time, the concept of “Not in Our Town” was born. From those roots it grew and sprouted up in many other communities across the country -- spawning a “Not in Our Town” (NIOT) national movement.

As the epicenter of the NIOT idea, Billings has secured a positive identity. New York City recognized Billings' leaders like Tooley, MacDonald, Schile, and labor leader Randy Siemers, with the city's prestigious Crystal Apple, usually reserved for major

national and international political, governmental or business leaders. Billings is now known across the world for the NIOT story. Former Mayor Tooley says that Billings' NIOT saga is what his town is best known for, noting that the community's response "encapsulates our character, at least the very best part of our character."

Now, twenty years later, Billings is the host city for a national "Not in Our Town" conference to recognize both its past accomplishments and the challenges of extreme bigotry and hatred that still face our nation today and into the future.

The fact that Billings was selected for the national conference speaks to its positive NIOT identity but also to its moral leadership.

But that moral leadership is challenged again by a new version of the bigotry and intolerance of the past. When Tooley recently approached the City of Billings for financial support for the National NIOT Conference, right-wing religious types came forward, claiming that any city support would advance "the homosexual agenda." At the same time they railed against prospective city passage of an anti-discrimination ordinance like those recently passed in Missoula, Helena and Butte.

The City Council seemed cowed by the intolerant rhetoric from the right and to this point has not been willing to invest a single penny in the effort. Shockingly, the Billings Gazette, previously a moral champion of the effort, argued against city money helping out the commemorative conference.

In expressing more concern for pennies than principle, the Gazette seemed to have forgotten that as the leading communications voice in Billings, it has a responsibility to not just reflect the values of the community, but also on occasion to lead the community in the right direction.

Can Billings live up to its legacy? Is Billings, through its city government and its leading newspaper, going to allow the continuing bigotry of the right, this time clothed in clerical garments, to tarnish the reputation of the city? Or is it going to stand tall again and proudly proclaim "Not in Our Town" ... for now and the future.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking proudly of Billings' past reputation and hoping for its future.

Evan Barrett of Butte, but formerly from Red Lodge and Roundup, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.