

An Opinion: You Are Being Watched!

Recently, I've had some very frank and intense conversations with some people about the youth in our community. I don't have kids, so I have not had the privilege of trying to navigate the teenage years and all that goes along with it-- setting up ground rules; following through on punishments; having discussions about sex, drinking and drugs; answering tough questions about what is right and wrong.

One of the things that really struck me when I moved to Vernonia and made this small rural community my home was how much everyone knows about everyone else, especially the kids. I heard time and time again how, when kids get in trouble at school, parents know about it before the child even gets home. There was some sense of pride within this community that everyone is watching out for each other and helping keep track of what all the kids are up to.

To me, it's very gratifying to know that people care enough and are concerned enough to talk to each other and try to work together to help keep our community and our children safe.

Facebook and other social networking sites are another way that adults in our community keep on top of what is going on among our youth. Many of the adults I know are "friends" with many of the youth here, whether it's with their own kids' friends or just other youth. Of course, kids are smart enough to know not to post an invite to this weekend's keg party, but is a way for us to monitor the comings and goings, and even sometimes the mental health of some of our youth. Cries for help, acknowledgment, or advice are not uncommon, and caring adults are often able to step in and offer an encouraging word or help.

The SKID program that was held last month is just one more example of our community showing kids we care about their well-being. The program is a graphic and visceral experience, a re-enactment of a fatal car crash that involves local teenagers playing themselves in a terrifying scenario. It's a gut-wrenching performance that includes local police, ambulance and rescue personnel, and even a hearse to take away a deceased young student. Much time, energy and volunteer manpower goes into this demonstration of what can go horribly wrong when young people make bad decisions. It was a powerful reminder for our students right before they headed off to Prom and with graduation right around the corner, and my hat goes off to everyone who worked so hard to bring this program into our community again-- especially the students who organized, planned and acted in the production.

But the SKID program isn't just a reminder

for our students. It should also be a reminder to the adults in the community: A reminder of what can go wrong when we make bad decisions. A reminder of the important role we play as models for our youth. A reminder of the huge responsibility we have to help establish healthy and safe normal behavior patterns in our community.

We have a culture in this community that encourages having a good time, hard partying and kicking up our heels. The Friendship Jamboree weekend is, of course, the ultimate-- a time when just about everybody tries to set aside the rules and have some fun.

We can tell our kids they should behave in certain ways, that they should be safe and make good decisions. But they will mirror what they see.

The idea that the adults in the community are watching our youth and know what is going on is comforting. But what was brought to my attention recently, which I had never really considered, is that that concept goes both ways. Kids are watching what the adults do as well. And they are talking with each other about it. They know when we go to the bar, drink and then drive home. They see our photos on Facebook when we are out with our friends having a good time. They know who is getting arrested and what for. They find out when we lie about what we've been up to. They read the column in the newspaper that glorifies beer drinking.

We can talk all we want about making good choices and wanting our children to be safe, but when we ourselves make bad choices, what message do we send? We send a much stronger message with our actions than we do with our words.

I don't mean for this to sound too preachy. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be able to go out every once in awhile and have a good time. I certainly don't mean to sound like I'm pointing fingers. I'm as guilty as anyone else of making bad decisions and not taking seriously my position as role model.

Because that's what we all are for our kids as adults in our community-- role models. And that means an extra responsibility to stop and think before we act. To stop and think about the messages we are sending. To stop and

think about what kind of community we really want-- for ourselves and for our children and then help create that community with our actions.

Stop and think before we act. That's what we tell out kids to do. It's good advice.

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A Message From Community Action Team About Flood Recovery

By Jim Tierney

Over the last 2-1/2 years, flood recovery staff from Community Action Team and Unmet Needs volunteers have spent countless hours advising clients, developing work plans, and working with state and federal staff to secure commitments of nearly \$12 million to assist our flooded neighbors in Vernonia. Even though many of us had experience with the 1996 flood, this recovery effort has turned out to be much more complicated than we initially imagined. At times, the flood recovery staff and I have been nearly despondent over the length of time it's taken to progress. Recently, I had an opportunity to spend a week in New Orleans. It was sobering and in a sad way, somewhat heartening.

I found that in New Orleans there are still many people living in FEMA trailers. It appeared to me that only the middle class and upper middle class neighborhoods have made substantial progress toward recovery. The exception to this is the now famous Lower Ninth Ward which has received a great deal of media and political attention (just as we have). As a consequence, the Lower Ninth Ward is in better shape than at least two of the other neighborhoods I toured. Corey Hooker, a longtime Vernonia resident, has been working as a volunteer doing flood recovery in Central City, the worst neighborhood in New Orleans. Corey's

neighborhood appears almost entirely unreconstructed.

During my New Orleans tour, I had a chance to speak with city and nonprofit officials working on flood recovery. I found that New Orleans and Vernonia have both different and similar barriers to recovery, including struggles with schools, federal and state agencies and the real estate depression. Another commonality is that every community must feel its way through the initial stages of recovery. There are no lessons plans for doing this work.

Among our strongest assets here in Columbia County are committed and skillful local government leaders. We are also very lucky that we have dedicated and talented staff in the Oregon Emergency Management agency and have the interest and involvement of the Governor. Finally, my trip to New Orleans gave me even more respect for the genesis of community resiliency. Those neighborhoods in New Orleans that were able to come together had one thing in common-- the strength and determination of their people.

In comparison to the plight of New Orleans, Vernonia has fared considerably better. We have had the coordinated support of local and state government as well as considerable private philanthropy. But a key reason for our success is our ability to unite behind

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