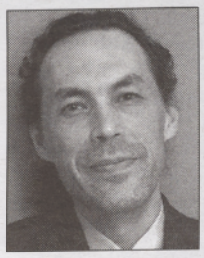
One act doesn't define you – not even voting for Trump

BY ANDY KO
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



PARTNERSHIP FOR SAFETY and JUSTICE

Andy Ko is the executive director of the Partnership for Safety and Justice, a statewide nonprofit advocacy organization advancing public safety solutions that ensure justice, equity, accountability and healing to achieve safe and strong communities.

"People are more than the worst thing they have done or the worst thing that has been done to them."

We say that quite a bit at Partnership for Safety and Justice. It is one way that we explain why PSJ prioritizes criminal justice reforms that address the system as a whole and focuses on the people most impacted by the system, including crime victims, people accused of crime, and the families and communities of both.

We are also making the point that people are complex. We all experience fear, anger, hope and despair. We love and want to be loved. We need to be safe. When we are harmed, we look for ways to heal. We want justice.

That odd little phrase also expresses our belief that no one is defined solely by a single experience. People suffer crime, but they are more than just "victims." People commit crimes, but they are more than just "criminals." All of PSJ's work hinges on this basic idea that people are more than the limited things we know or are told about them. Our approach to developing solutions that reduce mass incarceration, end racial disparities in arrests and prosecution, and address other problems that afflict our criminal justice system depends on our accepting both crime victims and people accused of crimes as more than the labels we affix to them.

I believe and accept all of this. But I still have had a tough time applying that learning to the recent presidential election. Given all that is happening, it is a seductive self-delusion to dismiss Trump voters as undereducated, counter-factual, misogynistic, possibly racist occupants of backwater regions of all those states in the middle.

The only problem is that it's not truthful. Two of the people I know best and love most in the world voted for Donald Trump. My Trump voters are not racists or generic haters. They are not unmoved by the stark disparities in income and opportunity faced by a massive number of our people. They understand full well why people would risk everything to come to the United States seeking a better life for themselves and their families. They care about things like the Bill of Rights. They are not stupid, even if I think their reasoning is based more on wishful thinking than objective reality. They both felt some degree of ambivalence toward Trump. As one memorably declared, "Donald Trump is a swine. But I'm still going to vote for him."

Doug and I have been friends – more like brothers, really – since we were 12. In our 20s, he was one of the people who helped me cope with the grief of my father's death. We grew up in a very rusty part of the old Rust Belt that began losing factories, jobs and families out of state in the '70s. After college and law school, Doug returned to live in our hometown and witnessed its continuing decline. He understands that most of the jobs that Trump promised to "bring back" to the U.S. were lost to automation, not foreign workers. But he still supported Trump, because in his view, only Trump was promising to try to do something to solve this problem.

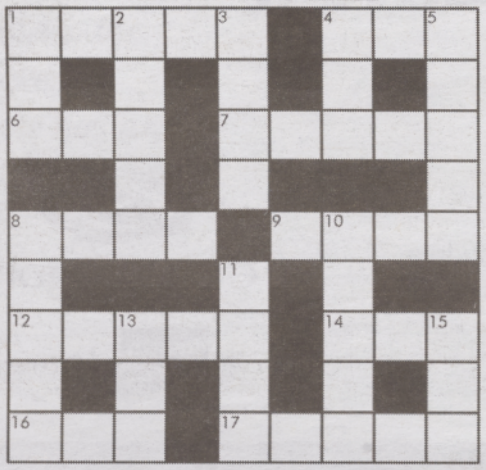
My other Trump voter is my brother. He is 19 months younger than I am; we might as well be twins. I can't remember a time without him. His daughter and I share the same name. We are very different and always have been. We fight. But, as children and young men, we did almost everything together. My brother cares about the Second Amendment. For him, it's all about the right to bear arms, so the president's next Supreme Court nomination is important to him. Long before Election Day, he decided that he'd rather have President Trump make that decision, not President Clinton.

Do I completely understand the choice that Doug and my brother each made on Election Day 2016? No. But, even if I believed that the worst thing they and almost 63 million other American voters have ever done was to vote Donald Trump into the White House, people are always more than the worst thing they have done or the worst thing that has been done to them. Trump voters had their reasons for going with The Donald, and we ignore their concerns at our society's peril. We are living in a time that demands solutions.

Lucky for me and Partnership for Justice's staff, we get to work toward solutions every day. One of our priorities this year will be to keep Oregon from making the mistake of opening a new women's prison. That requires solutions. We'll be working to realign Oregon's excessive mandatory prison sentences for people accused of certain drug and property crimes, ensure that convicted parents can be supervised in their communities to care for their children, expand a proven prison transition program that keeps communities safe while relieving pressure on the state prison system, and preserve funding for local services that reduce crime. Doing this work, we will be asking lawmakers to understand that two-dimensional representations of crime victims and people accused of a crime are unreliable as road signs for policy decision-making.

We are more starkly divided as a nation than at any time in the past half-century, and we have a president who seems intent on pulling the country farther apart at every opportunity. I don't know where it will all lead, but I do accept the old cliché that every crisis is also an opportunity. Hopefully, the opportunity to see people as more than Trump voters, crime victims, Clinton voters, or people accused of crime will help widen our sense of what is possible and build momentum toward a shared commitment to solutions. We'll see.

VOODOO DOUGHNUT
CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS
1. Fermentation agent
4. Have a bite
6. Tree fluid
7. Cake ingredient
8. Three-ply cookie
9. Hook's henchman
12. Ground grain
14. The gift of ___
16. Tease or ridicule
17. Francis or Kevin?

DOWN
1. Affirmative!
2. Type of fritter
3. Analyze or try
4. Cake ingredient
5. Tres
8. Deal
10. Potter's practice
11. Nosh!
13. Late rapper; abbr.
15. ___ appétit

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