

Learn the stories of others

Racism isn’t new. But as I was coming of age in the Sixties — Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when I left for college, and I had recently discovered James Baldwin — I had reason to hope things were changing for the better.

It’s harder to feel that optimism now. Each day’s news seems to carry a troubling story about a blatantly racist incident. Just this week, racist robocalls targeted Andrew Gillum, the Democratic nominee for governor of Florida, and of all people Mollie Tibbetts’ father, who had begged people not to politicize her death.

The calls came from a neo-Nazi podcast here in the Northwest. So I was especially happy to read the August 29 *East Oregonian* story about local high school athletes who spent a day at Tamástlikt Cultural Institute learning about the culture of the Natitayt, the people of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Rather than issue condemnation for past racial incidents at school sporting events, Aaron Noissey, Chuck Sams and John Bevis chose to help students get to know their competitors from Nixyaawii Community School.

What a good idea, I thought. It’s harder to see people as “other” when you hear their stories. “If I don’t know, don’t belittle me,

educate me,” is the way Noissey put it. At the First Draft Writers’ Series we’ve heard Native voices from all around the Northwest. Bobbie Conner, Jennifer Karson Engum and Thomas Morning Owl reminded us that place names tell stories of their own. Native writers Trevino Brings Plenty, Elizabeth Woody, Ralph Salisbury, Ruby Hansen Murray, Dawn Barron Pichon and Tiffany Midge spoke from the perspective of six different Native cultures, and students from Nixyaawii’s Poetry Club knocked our socks off at the Open Mic.

We have also been touched by the words of Mexican-American poet Xavier Cavazos, Chinese-American writer Alex Kuo, and Japanese-American Oregon Poet Laureate Lawson Inada. Following Sam Roxas-Chua’s ancestral story — born in the Philippines, he was left on the branch of a tree and adopted by Chinese-Filipino parents who later emigrated to the United States — helped us spin through the loops of the asemic writing he demonstrated for us with his swirling brush and black ink.

Of course, ethnicity isn’t the only focus at First Draft. We hear all varieties of human experience — love and loss, laughter, anger, fear — from men and women of all backgrounds, writers of all ages.

Imagine growing up in a patriotic family

at Hanford, sitting on your dad’s shoulders to wave at President Kennedy, and then watching your best friend’s father die from radiation poisoning. Kathleen Flenniken’s poems just might have helped us face our own internal contradictions.

What’s it like to be part of a poor working family in Coos Bay? Michael McGriff’s poems let us imagine. Not many will forget Kim Barnes’ story about a devastating accident that haunts a Northwest logging family.

Though we might have expected Ursula K. Le Guin to take us to a faraway planet, she read poems from “Out Here” while her friend Roger Dorband showed accompanying photographs of Harney County. We love ranching stories. Robert Stubblefield, Rob Whitbeck and Molly Gloss took us deeper into Eastern Oregon, Joe Wilkins into eastern Montana. On September 20, the week after Round-Up, Rebecca Clarren will be reading from “Kickback,” a novel set on a family cattle ranch in eastern Colorado in the midst of a fracking controversy. Clarren has been writing about the West for twenty years — for High Country News, Nation, and other publications — and her debut novel has been short-listed for the PEN/Bellwether Prize.

But because I’ve been thinking about racism, I keep coming back to last month’s featured writer, African-American poet Emmett Wheatfall, whose book “As Clean as a Bone” takes its title from Baldwin: “You want to write one sentence as clean



BETTE HUSTED
FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

as a bone.” Wheatfall’s response to HUD Secretary Ben Carson’s remark that “Slaves were immigrants coming to America in pursuit of the fledgling American dream” feels bone-clean: “Show me boat manifests listing each slave by name.”

“I’m as shattered as my slave ancestors were back then,” Wheatfall writes. But he adds, “What was broken then is being reassembled.”

I hope so. I do know stories help.

Latinos learn their worth in Idaho

By JERRY BRADY
Writers on the Range

It’s August in southern Idaho, and all is calm for the region’s dairy workers. But after four workers were picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, better known as ICE, in July, Latino families have mostly stayed inside, missing church and otherwise lying low.

In dairy country, the anxiety is constant.

Twenty years ago, a block of dairy operators around Chino, California, sold out and moved to Idaho, rapidly transforming it into the nation’s third-largest milk-producing state. Land was affordable, water plentiful, regulation light, and there were plenty of workers ready to milk cows, haul manure and operate machinery in a steadily automating industry.

The Idaho Dairymen’s Association’s website is clear about who those workers are today: “Of the 8,100 on-dairy jobs, 85-90 percent are filled by foreign-born labor.”

They are also foundationally important: “Without those jobs, none of the 31,300 supporting jobs would exist.” According to a recent study, 40,000 workers with milk, cheese, yogurt and related products have built a \$10 billion yearly value in a state economy of \$72 billion.

Yet because “foreign-born” is too often a euphemism for “illegal,” many of these workers are vulnerable. Consequently, so is an industry that is far more important to Idaho than its famous potatoes.

The undocumented dairy workers have come almost entirely from Mexico. However, in the last decade, a rising Mexican economy, declining Mexican birth rate and increased hostility up north has largely kept Mexicans at home. Dairymen’s Association Director Rick Naerebout says tomorrow’s workers will most likely come from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, yet it is families from precisely those countries that are being turned away by the president’s zero-tolerance immigration policy. (ICE flies more Guatemalans home than any other deportees — 317 full flights last year.)

So where will Idaho’s dairies find workers in the future?

Four arrests are not all that many, and ICE, which allows some autonomy to its regions, has mostly picked up people who have allegedly violated the law. This used to be the agency’s prime mission at the end of the Obama administration, and it was the practice for decades before that, when the United States largely allowed those who came to this country illegally to settle, establish families and enter the economy. Under the Trump administration’s hard reversal, however, much of American agriculture is threatened. Arrests of undocumented workers increased 42 percent during Trump’s first eight months.

The growing number of arrests means ICE must find more holding cells. The agency (under the Department of Homeland Security) has contracted with private prisons and local jails, including an offer to lease 50 beds in the Jerome County, Idaho, jail for a sum that struck county commissioners as a heavenly gift — \$1.3 million a year. It had plenty of beds to fill. Commissioners seemed unaware that this prospect sent fear through their Latino constituents, who make up 35 percent of the county’s adult and half of the county’s students.

What followed was unprecedented. Aroused by a popular Spanish-language radio host, Benjamin Reed, known on-air as “El Chupacabras,” and organized by a former dairy owner, Jane Miller, with help from the ACLU’s Betsaida Chavez Garcia, Hispanics and Anglos came together. To fight the jail, dairy workers and dairy owners, both small and large Latino-owned businesses, and folks from the churches organized.

The day of a July 10 country commissioners’ meeting, more than 600 people marched through town to the courthouse. They filled every available seat, spilled down the steps and out onto the sidewalks. County Commission Chairman Charles Howell says he felt “intimidated.”

The Idaho Dairymen’s Association sent a blistering protest to the commissioners, arguing against “working with ICE to increase the assets available for their enforcement action.” Workers were “highly agitated ... already leaving dairies ... in search of more welcoming communities,” the dairymen wrote. “We cannot be successful without the Hispanic Community you were elected to represent.”

Con Paulos, the local Chevy dealer and a grandson of Greek immigrants, made the case that “agriculture is all we’ve got in Jerome.” Without Latino workers, he added, there would be no economy.

The commission finally decided to fill its jail with prisoners from nearby Twin Falls County, saying the ICE contract proved less lucrative than presumed.

Did the jail experience leave the county better off? Former dairy owner Miller thinks too little has changed. But El Chupacabras, the radio host sparkplug, believes a “tipping point” is coming in five or 10 years. Look at the local schools, he says, because without Latino students, Jerome County would be losing population.

“Hispanics learned to check their pride at the border but that’s going to change,” he says. “People are fed up.” If so, the shift might have begun with the Jerome Jail demonstration of 2018.

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Kaepernick phenomenon created by his critics

The Baltimore Sun

If President Donald Trump hadn’t bragged at a campaign rally in Alabama that if he were an NFL owner, he would fire any “son of a bitch” who knelt during the national anthem, would Colin Kaepernick be a face of Nike’s Just Do It campaign? Would a black-and-white image of Mr. Kaepernick’s face with the words “Believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything” be ricocheting around the internet today if an NFL team, any NFL team, would have so much as signed him as a backup quarterback? Would players still be following his example to kneel or even raise their fists during the national anthem if his efforts to bring attention to racial injustice had been taken at face value and not as an affront to the flag, military and country?

All those posting images of burned or defaced Nikes since word spread of Mr. Kaepernick’s new Nike campaign over the weekend should consider this: It is they who transformed him from a quarterback whose career had been middling since taking his team to (and losing in) the Super Bowl into an icon, someone whose cultural power far transcends sport.

Nike isn’t so much thrusting him back into the spotlight as it is recognizing that he’s already there — and capable of selling shoes. Mr. Kaepernick’s jersey leaped to the top of sales lists after the anthem protests started in 2016 and stayed in the top 50 last year despite the fact that he wasn’t on an NFL roster. Nike’s stock may have dipped slightly in early trading after the announcement, but here’s betting that the sports equipment giant did some marketing research before signing what is reportedly a multi-year, multi-million-dollar deal with an athlete who is suing his former league and may never play again. Whatever buzz Under Armour may have gotten from its unconventional and statement-making ad choices in the past (like the exceptional Misty Copeland campaign of four years ago)

pales next to this.

Why does Mr. Kaepernick still resonate? Part of it is certainly the fact that he has, as the ad suggests, genuinely sacrificed a great deal in the name of principle. That’s always an intriguing narrative, and particularly so in the Age of Trump. Last week’s tributes to the late Sen. John McCain traded heavily on that notion. But there’s also the simple fact that Mr. Kaepernick’s message about protesting racial injustice has only become more relevant since its origins at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, the nation’s first African American president was (however imperfectly) seeking to achieve the kind of racial reconciliation many assumed had already arrived with his election. Now, we have a president who posits moral equivalence between white supremacists and those who protest them, emboldening those who would exacerbate and exploit racial division.

News about the Kaepernick ad came on the same weekend that the *Tallahassee Democrat* reported on robocalls linked to a white supremacist group in which a man speaking in a racist exaggeration of

a minstrel performer’s dialect pretends to be the Democratic nominee for Florida governor, Andrew Gillium, who is African American. The recording, which includes a backdrop of jungle sounds, makes reference to his Republican opponent’s statement a few days before that Florida voters shouldn’t “monkey this up” by voting for Mr. Gillium.

Colin Kaepernick still matters because his message still does. NFL owners couldn’t make him go away by keeping him off a team (whether through outright collusion, as his lawsuit alleges, or a more informal groupthink), and they couldn’t stop the protests that stemmed from his activism through ham-fisted attempts at compromise with the players. President Trump raised the stakes too high for that. Nike, who has had Mr. Kaepernick under contract since 2011, is doing nothing more than taking advantage of the opportunity the president and his allies so cynically created.