



Focus on communities - small and large

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Jan 6, 2008 — Since I've become part of this project called community columnists, I've spent some time thinking about the concept of "community." The YDR has, of course, recruited local people as writers of this column, and the idea is to keep subject matter pointed in the direction of issues that resonate within the borders of York County; issues that - if not unique to this county - are, at least, connected to and/or have their resolution within this county.

This column will showcase the many conflicting ways that the word "community" plays out in our lives. The explicit meaning of the word is simply a group of people. Yet implicit in the word "community" is the concept of a shared experience, as straightforward as the people living within the confines of a single neighborhood or as complicated and contradictory as an affiliation with a political party or a religious faith.

Community is the prism through which we view our lives. The more narrowly we define our

community, the more we fear those people outside it and the less attention we give to the problems that are not within it. A narrow definition of community creates the damaging gulf that lies between the words "those people" and "my people." Problems grow larger or recede, people draw together or pull apart based on that word.

In our own backyard, our connections to our neighbors play out in many ways. From the merging of municipalities and school districts in order to solve mutual problems - to the study that finds black York County residents 24 times more likely to be sent to prison for drug charges than white residents - our sense of community must adapt if we are to solve problems and thrive. In fact, according to David Rusk, writer of the Rusk Report, if York County does not adapt, the city will be dead in his next 10-year update. Metro-York has provided a blueprint for survival if we are smart enough to heed it.

On the larger stage, the far-reaching ripples of our sense of community, or lack of it, can be seen in what our household chemicals have done to the Chesapeake Bay. Our yards may be weed free and attractive, our farms more productive, but pesticides and fertilizers are killing our rivers, streams and food supply. You've probably heard people describe air pollution as the smell of money, but the inconvenient truth about pollution is that it steals healthcare dollars from our pockets and threatens our future. And speaking of healthcare dollars, how can we ignore the nine million children in our nation who are without healthcare? Our unwillingness to

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invest in them represents the most constricted perception of community possible, one that does not include the future.

And so, here we are standing atop the calendar of a new and very special year. Every new year has the sense of a clean page to write on; a time to re-evaluate our lives, set new priorities or re-energize old ones. Another chance - we hope - to accomplish what we failed to achieve the prior year; to finally get right what we've gotten wrong up to now.

But this year, a presidential election year, also brings with it a time when we reaffirm the sense of community that is supposed to come with living in a democracy. We get to choose who will speak for and help to guide this diverse, dynamic, confusing conundrum of a nation that we live in. This year will underscore the way we think of ourselves and our connections to our neighbors both near and far.

There will be ample opportunity, for those who take it, to determine how a candidate defines the meaning of community. I hope this time we choose a leader who chooses *not* to pit the American people against each other, one who chooses instead to shift the spotlight away from matters of narrow ideological interest and toward the many areas of broad and deep concern. The more perfect union that our founders envisioned will wither otherwise. Without an informed, engaged electorate and one that can see beyond a narrowly defined sense of community, we'll be doomed to the red state/blue state hyper-partisanship that

defines our current national politics.

Our problems are large but no match for collective resolve.

Our world is as large as we have the courage to perceive it.

Judith Krieger lives in York Township.

New community columnists

Editor's Note: This week marks the start of a new rotation of community columnists. Here, in order of appearance, are the folks who will be writing over the course of 2008:

Judith Krieger, Lynn Schuessler, Phil Figdore, Barb Murphy, Tip Larkin, Adrienne McNeil, Lori Mitrick and Ronny Acosta.

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