

Immigrants Make This Country Great

Written by Mark Schultz, Special to the BT
July 2019 - Last Updated June 2019



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or several years we've witnessed the erosion of public discourse in our country as pundits, bloggers, and partisan politicians seek to gain political advantage by discrediting their opponents.

Daily news reports show us how willing they are to use ad hominem attacks instead of reason. Civil debate and compromise have been replaced by mudslinging. Their opponents are now

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“enemies,” to be defeated at all costs. Those who disagree are “disloyal.” Any dissent is suspect.

To be different is to be un-American.

It makes me wonder what is happening to my country. At age 59, I’m just old enough to remember a nation torn apart by the Vietnam War, civil rights, political assassinations, and presidential scandal.

But through it all, we could still hear voices of reason. Leaders of both political parties spoke of the good of civic equality and the dignity of all men.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson referred to “the soul of America” and the song “We Shall Overcome” when he called on Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, embracing diversity and social inclusiveness as not just the reality, but the common good.

Well, this is 2019, not 1965. For three years I have watched the man who is now our president disparage people different from himself. Never would I have thought it possible that the leader of the free world would call refugees and immigrants “vomit crossing the border.”

If Donald Trump understood the reality of U.S. demographics, and the aging of the population, he would know that our country needs immigrants to sustain the economy. Yet even though he and his apologists claim he’s protecting us from drug dealers, rapists, and murderers, he includes everyone crossing from the south in that venomous stew.

A casual observer might ask why the president would welcome immigrants from Norway (as he has said) but not from El Salvador or Guatemala. Consider that in January 2018, he characterized Haiti and several African nations as “shithole” countries. Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear understands what he really means.

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Travel bans for visitors from Muslim countries, a wall along our southern border, praise for anti-Semitic white supremacist hooligans in Charlottesville, and his tweets juxtaposing images of Rep. Ilhan Omar with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 all reveal this president's bigotry.

It's time for people of goodwill to stand up and say enough. Daily, I see immigrant Americans working to make America great. Examples surround us, but their stories are never told. Why not? Is it because fear and intolerance sell more advertising minutes than goodwill and kindness?

So here's a story from my point of view. On December 31, 2008, a Muslim-American immigrant saved my life.

I was riding my bicycle near Barry University when I skidded on sand on the roadway and crashed. I suffered six broken ribs and a broken clavicle. Smashed bones are painful enough, but I had no sense of how serious my internal injuries were, or that they were life-threatening. One doesn't feel internal bleeding from blunt force trauma.

The staff of the local emergency room where I was taken worked on me for about four hours. Around midnight, I was finally wheeled into a room, but the pain was so intense I couldn't sleep.

At about 6:00 a.m., one of the hospital doctors entered my room on his way through his morning rounds. He studied my charts for a few moments and then realized I was in deep trouble. Immediately he ordered that I be transferred to intensive care. Within ten minutes I was on a gurney. Within an hour I was being prepped for emergency surgery.

The doctor inserted a tube through my chest and into my left lung and drained a liter of blood from it. Without his intervention and skill, I would have drowned on my own blood.

I don't know much about the doctor, except that he is an immigrant from a Muslim country that Trump has threatened with sanctions. I only saw him for a short post-operative exam, when I had a brief moment to express my thanks to him.

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Some might say, “Well, he was just doing his job.” And that’s my point.

Every day, millions of Muslim Americans and other immigrants go about their business to make our country better. They go to work for themselves, their families and children, and their communities. They pay taxes and make a contribution to our society. They enrich our country with their presence. They defend our nation in our armed forces. We owe them our thanks, assistance, encouragement, and best wishes.

I teach at Doctors Charter School in Miami Shores. Many of my colleagues are immigrants, and several are Muslims. I see them working tirelessly to educate our diverse student body and enrich the kids’ lives.

Every day I look out at my classrooms, aware that few of my students have a white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant background like mine. I see wonderful, beautiful young people accomplishing great things. I’ve taught Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Christians from India, Iran, Haiti, Myanmar, Nigeria, and of course, Latin American and Caribbean nations.

Last year a graduating senior, a young woman from the Dominican Republic, was accepted at Dartmouth. In this year’s graduating class we had students of color (children of Haitian and Peruvian immigrants) who’ve been accepted at Duke, Rice, and Amherst College.

Year after year, 100 percent of our graduates, with the exception of those opting for military service, have matriculated to U.S. colleges and universities, to top-flight schools for top-flight young people.

Why don’t we celebrate their greatness? Why are their stories not told? Why do we allow Donald Trump’s bigotry to drown out the message of the great diversity of our country?

I want to reclaim the soul of America. I want to reclaim the days when the nation’s president proclaimed that “we shall overcome.”

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