Why I Love #Charlottesville and Hate Hate

August 14, 2017 By Shawn Decker

You have probably heard about the recent happenings in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a “Unite the Right” gathering of neo-nazis and white supremacists ended—to the surprise of few—with the intentional murder of an anti-hate, civilian protester.

I want to write about what Charlottesville means to me. It was always “the cool city,” about 20 or so miles away on the other side of the mountain from Waynesboro, where I grew up. In high school the first friend with a driver’s license would occasionally load a few of us up for a trip there. But Charlottesville really landed on my radar after I opened up about HIV in 1996. My doctor told me about a support group in Charlottesville for people with HIV, coordinated by the now-defunct AIDS Services Group (ASG). Being somewhat public via a POZ Magazine cover story and subsequent column, I was asked to serve on the Board for ASG—I was in over my head but fellow Board members sweetly told me that me just being there was a reminder of who they were there to serve. I’d occasionally throw in a joke to lighten the mood; that always counts for something.

Anyway, a couple of years later in 1998, I was in a position to move. A few years before I’d had a botched escape attempt from Waynesboro with Charlottesville as my intended destination. It didn’t work out because I think my parents were a little worried about my health: they had every right to be, as I’d yet to turn the corner and really face up to HIV. So in ’98, after a Board meeting one night I was talking to my friend, Cynthia Viejo about how I’d always wanted to live in Charlottesville.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. “I’m a real estate agent! What are you doing tomorrow?” I’ll never forget it—Cynthia drove me around Charlottesville the next day... one place was too close to campus, I really didn’t have the energy to stay up all night to the sounds of partying... one place had a lawn, I really didn’t want to cut grass.... we landed on a townhouse that was just perfect.

Shortly after I moved in I met Gwenn. And then we fell in love and she got a job with AIDS Services Group and was able to move in with me. When I got sick, my doctor since childhood had retired so I started seeing Greg Townsend at UVa. He minced no words, it was time to start HIV medications. Within the span of two years of living in Charlottesville, I had experienced my worst times, healthwise, with HIV.

I’d always looked to Charlottesville as a city that held some magic, even in those days from afar in

Waynesboro when we'd pile in a car to go see They Might Be Giants play a show. But as a young adult, that's where I saw my viral load drop from a million to undetectable. That's where I saw my t-cell count rise to about 300... then 400... then 600?!... for the first time ever... Charlottesville is where I made or at least entertained long-range plans for the first time, I'd never allowed myself that luxury before. It's where I've lived when I've gotten the news that I am an uncle. It's where I was asked to be a godfather.

Magic. Magic has happened my whole life. But I'm quite certain that much of the magic of the last twenty years of my life would not have been possible had I not moved to Charlottesville, which is a very diverse and open-minded community. Now, it's not perfect—no community is—but the people here do a great job of looking out for one another and have an innate sense of what is right and what is wrong. I sometimes wonder if, 30 years ago, had I grown up here would I have been thrown out of school after testing positive?

So back to this past weekend. On Friday, the day before the rally, Gwenn and I ran into some friends and everyone just shared their sense of dread. There'd been a lot of different opinions about how to handle the influx of hate that was showing up to grandmasterstand on our turf. Authorities were telling everyone to just stay indoors, to ignore what was happening. When I was getting a haircut, I ran into Katie Couric, one of many journalists who were here in town. She said she'd been informed that knives had been found hidden around Lee Statue, where the rally was set to take place. That night the racists and their Tiki torches marched on the grounds of UVa. I don't think they had a permit to do so. They surrounded anti-hate activists and beat them with their torches. That act reinforced how many of us felt about this "visit"—these people were coming in to intimidate and, if possible, hurt people.

A large group of out-of-towners showed up to promote hate, but an equally large number of local civilians and out-of-town activists turned up to protest them.

One of the reasons why I decided to stay far away from the action this weekend was because I knew there'd be a fight and I doubted the local authorities ability to really protect the public. I also have a bleeding disorder and the pen has always wielded better results in my hand than the sword. The impending doom my friends and I felt became even more evident on Saturday morning. I woke up and looked at my Facebook newsfeed which featured live video a couple of hours before noon, the official start time of the hate rally. Large groups of people brandishing helmets—more bicycle helmets than bikes—and rifles hanging from the shoulders of many of the white supremacists. People were throwing things at each other, the screams weren't quite clear but I had a pretty good idea that pleasantries weren't being exchanged.

Then it happened. On a street that I know well on the downtown mall: a cornerstone of Charlottesville's social structure. There are these two side streets that cut through the pedestrian mall; I've always hated them. As a driver, no matter how slow you drive through the middle, you have to be on constant alert for children and pets. As a pedestrian and a bleeder, I never get used to the fact of seeing a car drive though the middle of a pedestrian mall. For some reason, these side streets were open while the adjacent street, where the rally was happening, was closed. The

videos of that car speeding down that road into people is horrifying.

Considering the element that was visiting Charlottesville this past weekend, it sadly wasn't a surprise.

I wasn't planning on engaging in any way. Then I started getting a lot of messages from friends asking if Gwenn and I were safe. I hadn't posted that I was going to be staying away from the hot spots, so I posted that I was safe as I was reading posts from friends who were much closer to the danger, and also learning that friends were among the first responders to the main act of violence over the weekend- one of many. I'm proud of my community for how they handled this weekend, for stepping in to fight hate with force, to look out for each other and stand up for what is right.

I've read a lot of comments about how everyone should have just ignored the rally. That nothing bad would have happened if everyone had just cooled their tits. But all of these nazis have a home. It's not like they turn to dust, they return to their communities with their terrible ideas and skewed sense of victimhood. That's what we should call Klan hoods, now, by the way, "VictimHoodies." I'd posted a quick update on FB about Steve Bannon's flaming bag of dogshit landing on my front porch, but the truth of the matter is that these ideals and racism were there before Bannon saw money in helping to organize their hate for website hits. Before Bannon would use that skill to gain the ear and trust of the would-be-and-current President of the United States.

All politics are local. Well, yes, they are. But when these folks show up in your hometown and claim they are there to hold the President to his promises to them, well, then all politics are global. When it takes two days for the President to actually disavow nazis—it's maddening. Hiding and ignoring a problem like this visit doesn't work on the local level and, as Trump found out, it doesn't work on the global level either. My phone is lighting up now with whatever Trump's do-over statement is on nazis. I don't really care to read it as people continue to recover from the act of terrorism that killed one and maimed many more.

Charlottesville is not perfect—not by any means. But it is my home. A lot of the fighters who arrived here for things I detest (white supremacy, hate) have gone. The community remains. Nothing is tarnished. If an event like this past weekend was going to happen somewhere, I'd rather it have happened here, a city whose magic has only been enhanced by the good I've seen over the last few days. Those acts are the norm around here.

And for that I am deeply thankful.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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