

Walking each

By Kathy Norgard



The Gunnison Valley Diversity Walk celebrates both our differences and our commonality.

More than 80 women, men and children, accompanied by 30 or so dogs, walked side by side along Highway 135 on a brisk morning last October, with other walkers joining along the way. Passing motorists honked and waved in support.

These people weren't protesting, fundraising or racing. Rather they came together for the second annual Gunnison Valley Diversity Walk, a homegrown event to celebrate our diversity and similarities. People came from all parts of the valley to stroll together and get to know each other, some carrying homemade signs or banners they'd painted on old bedsheets. Mary Shannon Baim's red vest bore the message "Make America Kind Again."

Each walker received a free water bottle contributed by the Union Congregational Churches (UCC) of Crested Butte and Gunnison. No one need be thirsty. The reverend Kelly Jo Clark, of Crested Butte's UCC, joined the event because she believes showing support to people on the margins is one of the most important things she can do. "Diversity in our community is a gift, not a detriment," she said.

As an event organizer and participant, I overheard walkers along the route chatting in British as well as American English, Spanish, Czech, Portuguese, Russian and Polish. Mary Burt of Gunnison commented, "I'm walking today in solidarity with and support for all



minorities. I want them to know I'm an ally. I am one with them."

The half-mile route began at Gunnison's Six Points Training and Evaluation Center (an event sponsor) and ended at the IOOF pocket park on Main Street. Participants spanned many ages, and for some, this walk has become an annual tradition.

Keir Wark, one of the organizers, noted, "During a very negative election season, this walk is a wonderful opportunity for me to come together with others from all backgrounds in a sign of solidarity and peace."

As the group passed in front of City Market, a six-year-old girl asked Crested Butte's UCC Pastor Tim Clark if he had a quarter. Tim didn't have a quarter but gave the little girl the dime he had in his pocket. The girl walked over to a disheveled homeless man sitting on the lawn and gave him the coin. To Tim, that act symbolized the compassion and statement of unity of the Diversity Walk. He remarked, "It was a small, beautiful moment in the midst of a large,

beautiful event.”

Our 16,000 valley residents are diverse in many ways, including our physical and intellectual abilities. Mark Tredway, a client at Six Points Training and Evaluation Center, Inc., enthusiastically welcomed walkers at the start of the route. Some think “thrift store” when they hear the name Six Points, and it does have a well-stocked second-hand store thanks to generous community donations. Proceeds from that store help support Six Points programming for approximately 30 clients, who benefit from job training and placement, social skills classes, and special recreational opportunities facilitated by 22 professional staff members.

Halloween candy filled a bucket hanging from the handlebars of Polly Venard’s three-wheeled motorized chair. “This is my Harley Davidson,” Polly said with a grin. “I may not walk, but I get around with the help of this chair. It keeps me from feeling disabled.”

Wendy Kidd, pastor of UCC Gunnison, greeted participants and spoke as a representative of the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender) community. The back of her t-shirt read: “Be the church. Protect the environment. Care for the poor. Forgive often. Reject racism. Fight for

the powerless. Save earthly and spiritual resources. Love God. Enjoy this life. Embrace diversity.”

Walkers also came from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Many were born here. Others hailed from Argentina, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Cuba, Peru, the Czech Republic, Sweden and elsewhere. Many spoke English, some as a second language, and some not at all. Old and young, from varied religious and political affiliations, laughed and strolled together.

Marketa Zubkova from the Czech Republic said: “When we started the Diversity Walk last year, my hope was to promote immigrant integration, but it has become an integration event for our whole community.”

The 2016 sponsoring organizations, in addition to local UCC churches and Six Points, were the Hispanic Affairs Project (HAP), which helps newcomers from other cultures integrate into our valley; Living Journeys, which provides group support, counseling and funds to help anyone coping with cancer; and Welcoming Colorado, whose mission is to bring immigrants and non-immigrants together to share their stories.

Ellen Pederson, from the Gunnison County Multicultural Resource Office,

welcomed participants in Spanish. The Multicultural Resource program assists foreign-born individuals gain health care, translators and other day-to-day needs as they integrate into the American culture.

Ricardo Perez, director of HAP, noted there’s a lot of fear and anxiety among our immigrant communities. He hopes the Diversity Walk will ease some of that fear and help prompt leaders “to achieve fair immigration policies in the future.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, 54% of us in the Gunnison Valley graduated from college. Our median age is 34 years old. We are white, African American, Asian, Latino, American Indian and mixed races. We are married and single. Some of us are veterans. About 4.4% of us have a disability, and 15% of us live below the poverty line.

I figure most of us in this valley are immigrants. I helped organize the Diversity Walk to celebrate the importance of each one of us. We all matter and have important contributions to make to our community. It’s a privilege to live side by side, sharing our beautiful environment. We invite everyone, resident or visitor, to join the next Diversity Walk on September 30, 2017. **cb**

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