

As the new year begins, I have always found it useful to look back and take stock of what has happened. After 40 years away, I returned to Chico just over a year ago. One of the first things that happened to me is meeting Randy Suschnick, who had just discovered Chico Community Watch (CCW). When I went to my first meeting there, the group had around 400 members. On that occasion at Round Table Pizza, I spoke about my background and interests. Over the next few months, the relationship, my involvement, and the membership continued to grow.

As an attorney, I was interested in the policy issues that might affect the longer view of solving problems that drew this group together: illegal camping, dumping, and vandalism of our parks and waterways. The primary focus of CCW had always been the Lindo Channel. That was far from my home, and soon I was organizing cleanups of the Annie's Glen area and the picnic site #24 where I was married in 1974, and helped out on the amphitheater project. I have participated in and recruited volunteers for other groups as well, including Butte Environmental Council and Friends of Comanche Creek. On occasion, Chico First has organized its own events.

I have consistently explained that my orientation to these problems was not homelessness, though I acknowledge that there is a connection between homelessness and illegal camping. But I also know that not everyone offending our local ordinances is homeless. In fact, whether someone is homeless or not is not really relevant to the offense.

The reason why volunteers find anything to clean up at all when they organize a cleanup of our public spaces, is because someone has violated one or more of our public safety and quality of life ordinances.

Local laws like those banning camping in public parks for nearly all cities in California are generally found in the "Public Safety" sections. For Chico, they are under Title 9, "PUBLIC PEACE, SAFETY, AND MORALS", Division III, PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY OFFENSES AND REGULATIONS. These are generally referred to, in legal parlance, as "quality of life" offenses, particularly when they involve littering, leaving biowaste and drug castings, trashing green spaces, and vandalism.

I am primarily concerned with public safety and quality of life offenses, not homelessness per se. We do not enforce laws based on the condition or status of the person, (the idea behind so-called vagrancy laws of the past). Likewise, we do not excuse offenses based on condition or status either. Laws are enforced for bad conduct. Therefore it is quite properly and literally true to state that homelessness is not a crime. That principle has been clearly established in various rulings for the Supreme Court of the United States. But crime, even petty crime, is still a crime.

Over the course of the past year, I did participate in cleanups, and learned firsthand what we were facing. But I also devoted much of my time learning about the history and current status of local, state and federal laws that impacted enforcement in Chico. I met with many people; other activists and concerned citizens, business leaders, CSUC professors, City Council members, the

Chief of Police, and just about anyone else who would talk to me about the issues they had been trying to deal with over the years.

I tried to put some of what I learned into a paper called “Public Safety and Quality of Life in Chico”. I distributed it to whoever was interested, or to those I thought should be interested. I posted it on the Chico Community Watch page, where I also posted regularly, engaging many different ideas and points of view surrounding this issue. Occasionally, this exchange led to name-calling and personal attacks rather than the civil discourse I am committed to. Over the year, CCW membership grew by some 400%.

As the membership grew, naturally the diversity of views expanded as well. In one exchange I recall, a member complained that I was more concerned with homeless people sleeping in the bushes than large scale pollution caused by commercial operations, such as factories and housing developments. In the back and forth, the other poster said he thought I was a “vigilante”, and that I was more concerned about whom I was going after, meaning the homeless.

As lawyers are prone to do, I explained the difference between a “vigilante” and the idea of “vigilance”. Vigilantes are guilty of taking the law into their own hands: police, judge, jury, and sentencing. It is a Spanish word stemming from the “frontier justice” concepts of the old West. KKK lynch mobs are a more recent example. There is no question but that such conduct as this is a crime, a serious one, and I took strong exception to being accused of this without cause or evidence.

Vigilance, while sharing the same Latin root for “watchfulness” is closer to the original meaning; a “vigil” is a watch kept while others are sleeping. In the context of Chico First, vigilance means that we pay attention to problem areas to guard against losing the ground we have gained.

Since my initial involvement with Chico Community Watch, I have been focused on broad policy issues. Nonetheless, I support the objectives of that group, and seek to offer assistance however I can. Even in my criticisms, my intention has always been to help the group succeed.

Over time, though much was shared in our common vision, a widening logistical gap arose between the more focused and limited objectives of CCW and the broader policy approach I believe is needed to affect long-term, permanent solutions. In collaboration with a few others, we decided to create Chico First in October 2017, and we launched it on November 3rd. We will be launching a companion web site soon that will have useful tools and information that we hope will be interesting and useful to those working on Chico quality of life issues.

The goal is to have clearly articulated policies and principles with regard to collaboration: unity, action, vigilance. In addition, our group would be focused on public safety and quality of life issues and to invite civil discourse on controversial issues. We agreed that posting protocols would be strictly and consistently reinforced. We would not censor for content as long as it is

relevant to our mission, and we wouldn't edit past discussion to make them appear as something other than what was originally posted. We would never tolerate personality politics or incivility.

We can agree on common principles, common goals, and common actions without having to agree on every last detail of one's political, ideological, or religious beliefs. That is the larger meaning of Unity; cooperation, collaboration, and working together for common goals. We don't strive to unify one group against another, but to collaborate with anyone willing to work for improvements in public safety and quality of life.

This is why we are well advised to focus on conduct, not imagining motives. While conduct often reveals one's motives, our entire system of law and justice, and our personal morals are best practiced as a response to observable conduct. As the saying goes, "Don't tell me what you believe. Show what you do and I'll tell you what you believe."

We believe we are in a crisis. We believe there are some among us who don't respect the principles of citizens' rights to public safety and quality of life, demonstrated by their unlawful and disrespectful treatment of our public and private property. We believe it is up to each of us to do what can be done to reverse this trend, and return Chico to a place that is known universally for its beauty, cleanliness and safety.

We believe that to accomplish this, we must adopt an attitude of "Chico First" as a unifying principle that brings us together around these common goals which are larger than any of our own personalities. If you watch what we do, we expect you will find that our words and our actions are consistently aligned. Join us, and welcome us to join you. We are all in this together.