

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

# Upper Darby officials urge unity, respect

**By Alex Rose**

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**UPPER DARBY »** Police Superintendent Tim Bernhardt joined Mayor Barbarann Keffer and Upper Darby School District officials at the high school Wednesday to discuss what Superintendent Dr. Daniel McGarry called the “extremely unsettled legacy of race relations” in America during a joint press conference.

“It’s important that we show solidarity as a community,” said McGarry. “We all have a role to play in this. Obviously the township has a different role than the school district with schools letting out, but we’re not going to

stop just because schools are letting out. We’re in this together – we support Tim Bernhardt, we support the mayor, we are in here to support this community.”

School Board President Edward Brown said the senseless death of George Floyd in Minneapolis May 25 at the hands of police officers affected him as a black man, as a father and as a proud American.

Brown added that the callous, egregious disregard for human life captured on video was shocking to the soul and made him realize that he is powerless to protect his children against the myriad potential harms that exist for them simply due to the color of their skin.

“I can’t protect my children

from being black,” he said. “That’s what they are and will always be ... What keeps me up at night is that I can’t protect them while they are living life – by walking in the park, or barbecuing with friends, or crossing the street, or even sitting in their own home. These are all mundane, everyday tasks and joys of life that should not put them in harm’s way. We must be better. We must be better.”

Brown said the change needed across the country can start one person at a time by treating each other with respect, dignity and grace, by truly embracing equality, and recognizing that all people are essentially the same, with the same drives toward happi-

ness, love and trying to do the right thing.

“I don’t know how far your journey is or how many adjustments you have to make, but let’s start today,” said Brown. “Let’s start today so that there are no more George Floyd incidents. Let it be the last outrageous, senseless death that takes a piece away from our collective humanity.”

“Now is the time to listen,” said Bernhardt. “We’re not here to talk at people. It’s for us to listen, to come up with a plan and to move forward with all the students and the residents in Upper Darby Township, with the mayor and her staff and the school district. We promise you that we are going to listen and we are going to

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*– Upper Darby School District Superintendent Dr. Daniel McGarry*

move this forward. Today is a new day and we are going to work on overcoming the challenges that this country is facing right now.”

The conference came just days after looters swarmed out of Philadelphia into the 69th Street corridor, smashing windows and grabbing merchandise from numerous stores.

Bernhardt said Wednesday that the National Guard, which had been in place there since Monday

**UNITY » PAGE 9**

# Unity

FROM PAGE 4

night, was still assisting police with pedestrian and vehicular traffic Wednesday, and that stores there remain closed as the owners evaluate the damage.

He also addressed a growing number of videos and images that appear to depict police officers across the country using excessive force against protesters who have gathered peacefully to condemn the very tactics being used against them.

Bernhardt said he would not comment on how other

departments are dealing with demonstrators, but said his approach has been to work with protesters rather than instigate.

"On Sunday, when Upper Darby had the incident at 69th street, the last thing I wanted to do or my staff was going to do was to entice or to make it worse," he said. "The incident for us was terrible, there was a lot of destruction, but there were no attacks against police. They did not turn against us and I think our approach is the reason why. We were forcing the crowd to move on and giving those that wanted to protest the opportunity to protest. There were no at-

tacks on us, there were no fires. The looting did occur - which is outrageous, it was chaos, it was unacceptable - but the approach we had was to not make it worse."

McGarry proposed convening a community committee to problem solve and develop strategies to bring people together once social distancing restrictions are lifted so all voices feel they have a seat at the table.

Fear and divisiveness will not do that, he added, only action rooted in real, social systemic change will unite the community and ease the minds of children who may feel that there are system in place that are in-

tionally structured to keep them from reaching their goals.

"There is a hope for change," McGarry said. "It is in the parents, neighbors and our friends who must work together to confront the ingrained prejudice and injustice in our society if real change is going to take place. It's going to take all of us, as you've heard today, every single one of us have to come together to do this."

"Our children are watching us, listening to us, to see our actions and reactions to everything that is happening here in Upper Darby and around the country," said Keffer. "They see how

we are handling the uncertainties of the pandemic, compounded with the reality that not much has seemed to change in terms of race relations."

Keffer said children saw the reactions to professional athletes taking a knee to protest police violence against the African America community, and how a knee was used to take the life of George Floyd.

"They see these things and know that something is very wrong," she said. "Our children see what we post and share on social media, how we talk about what is happening. It is up to us to provide leadership with the tone of our conversations

and posts, and that is only the beginning."

Keffer also urged the community not to confuse peaceful protests that were seen over the weekend and Monday evening in Upper Darby with the kind of looting and vandalism that took place on 69th Street Sunday night.

"We have the opportunity to shape a future that addresses the longstanding systemic inequities that plague our nation," said Keffer. "Let's not squander it. Let's focus on the hard work we must undertake to focus on creating a community based on compassion, mutual respect and equity."