

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The world comes to Upper Darby, in more ways than one

I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess it was not the best of weeks for Dan McGarry and the Upper Darby School District.

That's what happens when an incident that happened in one of your school parking lots makes its way to the network news.

That's right, McGarry, the youthful Upper Darby superintendent, went from fielding calls from the Daily Times to being asked for comment from the CBS Evening News and CNN.



Phil Heron
Heron's Nest

What started as an unfortunate fender-bender in the parking lot of the Drexel Hill Middle School exploded into national news when one of those involved - who just happens to be a teacher at the school - unloads on the other driver, the parent of a student, in a racially charged diatribe.

She was white. He was African American.

Of course it was captured by the parent on his cell phone video. Isn't everything these days? The parent posted the ugly incident to his Facebook feed.

I don't have to tell you what happened next. It's the social media-drenched world we live in today. As soon as I saw the video, I knew what was going to happen next. The softball-sized rock I carry around in my gut each day was going to get a little bigger.

So I can only imagine what was happening in McGarry's intestines.

To his credit, McGarry never flinched. He didn't put the wagons in a circle and offer the standard "the district is aware of the incident and it is under investigation."

Instead, McGarry took a different tack. He took an awful moment, one drenched in racial invective, one that had the ability to drive a divisive wedge through the heart of the school community, and used it as a teachable moment.

McGarry moved immediately to place the teacher on administrative leave. Then he sought to heal the gaping wound that had been inflicted on the Upper Darby community.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that this ugly incident took place in Upper Darby. If you are looking for a melting pot, the American dream come to life, you've come to the right spot.

There are more than 70 dialects spoken in the district. Students in Upper Darby schools come from every corner of the globe.

The job of applying salve to the wound, of bringing us back together, of uniting us in the face of such divisive rhetoric, now becomes the teachable moment in Upper Darby.

The importance of this harsh moment - and the threat to that rich tradition of diversity - was not lost on McGarry.

"The deeply troubling comments and actions of this teacher are not indicative of the hundreds of outstanding teachers working in our schools each and every day," McGarry said. "We are a district of over 12,400 students and a community of over 82,000 residents from over 60 countries, with over 70 different home languages. We are a community of many cultures and backgrounds, and we value our diversity. It strengthens us."

After spending the weekend as a trending national news story, McGarry announced Monday that that he would recommend the teacher involved be fired. But even that sparked questions as to why the teacher was not being terminated immediately. There is a process for such procedures, one McGarry must follow. But he left no doubt as to where he stood, and his vow to use this divisive incident to make the Upper Darby community more united than ever.

"I do not want this incident to define who we are," McGarry said. "Instead, I would like for all of us to use this unfortunate incident as a teaching tool to au-



MEDIA NEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

Upper Darby Superintendent Dan McGarry recently found himself and his district in an unwelcome national spotlight.

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— Upper Darby Superintendent Dan McGarry

thetically reflect on the harm caused by such hurtful words and actions."

Yes, words matter. Their power - for both good and bad - is immeasurable.

That was one of the things I mentioned Wednesday night when I served as the keynote speaker of the Royal Oak Chapter of the National English Honor Society.

At Upper Darby High School. But first I shared it with the gentleman seated directly to my left.

That would be Superintendent Dan McGarry.

"So, how is your week going?"

I greeted him.

He had hustled back from a superintendents' function in Hersey for the event. I'm glad he got the chance. But I'm even more glad I got the opportunity myself - for two reasons: As you might guess, words are important to me. I have a fondness for the English language, even though there are times when my critics wonder what language I am actually writing in. The evening also disproved one often-espoused theory about young people, while confirming something I already knew about Upper Darby.

I get told all the time that young people today have no interest in reading, let alone writing.

Unless, of course, you count texting, which seems to be the preferred means of communication of today's youth.

It pains me, in part, because a lot of people believe that is part of the slow funeral procession that the print industry is undergoing. Simply put, if it didn't happen on kids' phones, it didn't happen.

They are said to have no interest in formal writing.

I've always suspected that there was more than a little bit of hyperbole involved in that theory.

Wednesday night I got proof as the guest speaker at the induction ceremony for the incoming new members and recognition of seniors in the National English Honor Society at Upper Darby High School. It's the only national organization that is exclusively dedicated to acknowledging high school students in the field of English.

More importantly, one glance at this group of ebullient young faces once again confirmed the beauty of Upper Darby. These kids come every imaginable background, united in their love of reading and writing.

It would be easy to allow a single unfortunate incident that thrust the district into the national spotlight to overtake the miracle that takes place in Upper Darby schools every day.

As usual, those kinds of stories never tell the full story, and don't come close to representing the district as a whole.

Dan McGarry is vowing to make sure that does not happen. These kids are just some of the reasons why.

Write on, kids. Write on!

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