

OVERLAND PARK & LEAWOOD

Two years after hate crime shootings, Mindy Corporon vows to 'banish fear and ignorance of other faiths'

BY JENNIFER BHARGAVA

SPECIAL TO THE STAR



APRIL 19, 2016 04:42 PM



The SevenDays event was created by Mindy Corporon and Jim LaManno, along with a group of volunteers, as a way to remember Corporon's son and father, Reat Underwood and William Corporon, and LaManno's wife, Terri LaManno, who were murdered outside of Overland Park Jewish sites in April 2014. On Monday, candles were lighted in memory of the three. **THOMAS A. BRADLEY** SUBMITTED PHOTO

Each bullet fired was intended to ignite hatred and fear in Kansas City's Jewish community. Instead, the echoes of those gunshots from two years ago are bringing people of all faiths closer together.

As more than 1,000 people left the Jewish Community Center in Overland Park for the streets Monday evening, their faces lit up with smiles. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and many people from other faiths donned blue T-shirts and strode together in solidarity in a Peace Walk that wrapped up the second-annual SevenDays: Make a Ripple, Change the World movement.

The walk ended 3 1/2 miles away at the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood.

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Last year, the event revolved around kindness, Corporon said. This year, it's also about interfaith relations.

"The goal and hope is that we can help prevent people from reaching for a gun in hatred," she told The Star. "We want to banish fear and ignorance of other faiths."

From April 12 until Monday a dozen SevenDays events were held in the Kansas City area. They included an interfaith youth workshop, a blood drive and numerous speakers.

It was a week filled with events that not only paid respect to the past, but held valuable lessons for today, said Mahnaz Shabbir, a social activist who led a SevenDays workshop at Cleveland University on Sunday titled "Understanding Our Muslim Neighbors."

"There are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world with very vast cultural backgrounds," she said. "We're not the same. With the political climate out there revving up fear, an event like this is extremely important. We should not be filled with hate for something we know nothing about."

Putting interfaith dialogue at the core of this year's event stemmed from Corporon's own journey. After her father and son were killed by an anti-Semite, she made it her mission to learn more about Judaism.

Several months after the shooting, she set foot in a mosque for the first time to comfort the family of a Somalian man murdered in a hate crime.

"This type of violence makes you want to ball up in a corner, but that doesn't heal you," she said.

Her sentiment was echoed by Thursday evening's speaker, North Carolina state Sen. Malcolm Graham, brother of Charleston shooting victim Cynthia Graham Hurd.

"We are in a fraternity no one wants to be a member of," Graham told The Star. "You don't sign up for it, but all you can do is embrace the pain by holding your hands together and praying. We don't let the perpetrator win — that would just give him power. The power is with us and our beliefs, no matter your faith."

He was impressed with Kansas City's determination to turn a tragedy into a triumph. And he was inspired by the SevenDays mission to combat religious prejudice. That, Graham said, is a solution to preventing violence.

"This community support extends beyond city limits," he said. "We are all in this together, because racism is alive and well in this country. We all have to be on guard and respond to it."

In his speech at the Church of the Resurrection, Graham told the audience about the heart-wrenching moment his family learned that his sister, a hardworking librarian, had been murdered inside her place of worship.

His faith has been challenged and he's still on the path of restoring it, he said.

His words resonated with audience member Deb Lail of Olathe.

~~"When you share something that emotional and bring people together through grief, it's amazing," she said. "Hearing Malcolm's story really~~

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Graham’s message especially hit home with Corporon, since it resonated with the SevenDays theme, “Make a ripple, change the world.”

“The people of Charleston didn’t burn their town down or erupt into violence,” Corporon said. “When a town chooses love over violence, it creates a ripple.”

Moments before the peace walk began on Monday evening, that ripple made its way through the crowd.

For Jay Coombes, an actor from Lenexa, the joyful scene of families laughing and friends hugging was quite different than the one he witnessed at the Jewish Community Center two years ago.

He had been in his car when the shooter opened fire in his direction. It was one of the most frightening moments of his life.

Back at the scene, with his 8-year-old son, Coombes said he’s a different man now.

“It’s been a journey of being kinder, making more time for my family and doing what I can to help others,” he said. “I’m sorry it took a tragedy for it to happen, but the reality is I’m a better person now.”

Others said the community as a whole had been strengthened over the past two years, as people turned hate into love and misunderstanding into acceptance.

“The tragedy is not what you want Kansas City on the map for, but the way the community has handled it makes me so proud,” said Ora Reynolds of Leawood. “It speaks volumes about the type of people living here. I hope this event continues to grow.”

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