

SJC Living

DAN ENDSLEY: Odds and Endsley

San Juan Got It Right, Why Can't the Rest of the Country?



San Juan Capistrano has about as much history as any place I know. From the Mission to the Swallows Inn to Los Rios Street and even our famous little

feathered friends who fly home to watch the parade in their honor, we are known throughout the region and beyond. It's a rich and colorful history of which everyone can be proud.

With all of our horse stables in town and mile after mile of riding trails, some call us one of the last vestiges of the Old West, gentrified to be sure, but still a throwback to by-gone times.

I think history will also record what happened in San Juan last November as a significant event of historical perspective. Leading up to the election we had both the failed school board recall and packed City Council meetings concerning the golf course expansion plans. It appeared neither effort was gaining much traction.

I've seen community activists in action before. I've been an activist on a couple of occasions, most recently the first Gulf War. In nearly every case a few people get involved, make a lot of noise, get some headlines and then burn out. This did not happen last year in San Juan.

Even after the county Czar of Voters disqualified enough petition signatures to keep the school board in power, the people didn't quietly fade back into their everyday lives. They continued to both investigate and invest their time, talent and money to bring long-needed change to CUSD. As we saw on Election Day, they got the job done when the people got to vote rather than some bureaucrat sitting at Orange Country headquarters.

The same thing happened at San Juan City Hall. When politicians are in office too long, even the good ones lose touch with the voters. Look at the current state of the House and Senate in Washington. Their approval ratings are two points south of Alfred E. Newman's, sorry ... I meant George W. Bush's, yet nearly all of them continue to get elected time after time.

The same could be said for San Juan until last year. Many voters were extremely upset that City Hall had turned a deaf ear to their concerns about the

fate of historical and picturesque San Juan Creek Road. In spite of heavy spending on advertising campaigns that would make my brother-in-law on Madison Avenue proud, the voters spoke loudly and clearly on both the golf course expansion issue and the elected officials who, for whatever reason, listened to the developers rather than the voters.

With three new members on City Council and at least one old member who "got some religion" after the vote, history will view last year's events as a watershed year in the history of San Juan.

Activism runs in inverse relationship to how well our politicians are performing. As San Juanians proved, it can work well on the local level. Whether it's lack of exposure via the media, lack of time and talent, or too much money in the hands of the entrenched special interests; it's nearly impossible to bring change of San Juan's magnitude to the state or national level.

How low will our state and nation have to sink before enough people get together and "throw the bums out." Many thought California was on the right track when The Governor was swept into office. After a little lip service to change, he quickly became one of them rather than one of us.

On the federal level, politicians spend more time ensuring their re-election than they do on righting the ship that, by many accounts, is listing strongly. Most legislation coming out of Washington falls into one of two categories. Firstly we have the "incumbent protection bills." Secondly we have the "payback my financial supporters and good friends bills." The second is obviously done primarily to support the first.

Neither category does much for the average Joe and Jane on the street that work hard taking care of their families. Those who throw trillions of our tax dollars around like thank you notes sit on Capitol Hill, laughing off-camera at us for believing more in what they say than what they do.

I'm proud of the people of San Juan who got it right last election. I can't wait to say the same thing about Sacramento and Washington.

Dan Endsley is a San Juan Capistrano resident and business owner. ■

JENNIFER CONNELLAN: Future Focused A Bit Too Challenging?



Some of you may have heard about the controversial program called Challenge Day. It is a one-day workshop put on at schools around the

country, designed to help students break down the walls of separation and create new levels of respect and communication with their peers, teachers, parents and themselves. Oprah featured the program on her show recently and absolutely raved about it, saying, "This is the way we change the world." Along with fervent enthusiasm and praise by Oprah and others, Challenge Day has also been heavily criticized by educators, parents and the media.

Out of intrigue, I decided to check it out for myself. Last Friday, Corona Del Mar High School hosted a Challenge Day, and I volunteered as an adult facilitator. As I walked into the small gym where it was being held, I was skeptical. Even in the brief introduction for the adult facilitators, it was clear that the program capitalized on a combination of the power of group dynamics, adolescent emotional volatility, and a carefully crafted series of games, activities, group discussions, icebreakers and trust-building exercises to encourage heavy emotional intensity for the day.

This is indeed what happened. In the beginning, the 100 10th-grade students were anxious. They sat by their friends, fidgeted in their chairs and seemed to wonder whether a day of school would have actually been preferable to what they might experience with Challenge Day. But then things began to change. The two Challenge Day leaders captured the students' attention immediately and won them over with humor. Although they were still self-conscious and embarrassed, the students started having fun.

The room was charged with emotion. Students were partnering up with peers they did not know, admitting their most embarrassing moments, and sharing, "If you really knew me, you would know..." Inspired by the leaders' stories about their own challenges, students were revealing deeper and deeper personal issues to each other. Tears

began to flow, hugs were given, and new connections were formed.

By the end of the day, there was not a dry eye in the room. The level of connection and acceptance among the students was incredible and there was a great deal of love and support created. Kids who had previously bullied and teased each other hugged and forgave one another. Students seemed to leave feeling less alone and isolated, and more motivated to create positive change in their school.

Although these activities were inspiring and transformational for many students, I could not help but worry about certain components of the day. One of my primary concerns was confidentiality. Even though the leaders gave specific instruction that everything said at Challenge Day should remain confidential, I worried that slip-ups would happen and kids would get hurt. The students were sharing their deepest secrets; everything from parental drug abuse to violence in the home to shame about poverty. How could Challenge Day ensure that the students' issues would be protected?

Another concern was with student safety. With a background in clinical psychology, I fully understand the psychological ramifications (both positive and negative) of revealing personal vulnerabilities. It can be an incredibly empowering and relieving experience, but often times there is a significant amount of self-doubt and shame that follows. After leaving the 'safety' created and sustained during Challenge Day, how would these students deal with the after-effects?

Clearly Challenge Day has tremendous potential in inspiring positive change in schools, but there are also aspects of it that are quite risky. Perhaps the program could add on-site psychological professionals and specific follow-up safety procedures. This might help ensure that Challenge Day remains effective in breaking down barriers between students, but also helps make certain the students receive the support they need during and after the program.

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