

Our Executive Director, Donna Pray, received an email yesterday that she shared with staff and board members who were at our offices, helping answer phones and accept donations for the Gilroy Garlic Festival Victims Relief Fund. We wanted to share Mark Derry's email with our Foundation friends, as we think it represents what many of us are feeling in Gilroy. #GILROYSTRONG #giverwhereyoulive



Early Sunday evening, another successful Garlic Festival in the books. We had left the Festival a bit after 4 p.m. after watching our son-in-law compete in the Garlic Showdown Iron Chef competition on the glorious Cook-off Stage. The setting itself is a testament to prolonged success and ingenuity with its mammoth video screen, mirrors and decorated cooking stations. A merry band we were, a contingent of family and friends, rooting on our favorite chef. Our three grandchildren, all under 9 years old, were scooting here and there and trying to catch garlic bulbs tossed into the grandstands by the jovial emcee.

We milled around after the competition, then headed home.

The phone rang as we settled in.

"There's an active shooter at the Festival," our daughter said. She's a local law enforcement officer.

Disbelief first. Hope second. Thoughts: nobody seriously hurt, please God. Then as reality came to light: Tears. Profound sadness. Emptiness and, yes, anger. So many people texting and calling with the same inquiry, "Are you and the family OK?" So many messages sent asking others the same question.

Yes, we're safe but not really ok ... honestly, it feels like losing a close friend or a family member suddenly without warning. For any Gilroyan tied to the Festival, a surreal disbelief has set in.

We are in mourning, for the victims, for the senseless violence that can shred lives in seconds.

When I edited the Gilroy Dispatch newspaper for three decades, we fondly referred to the our jaunty July party as the one, the only, the world-renowned Great Gilroy Garlic Festival.

That title, bestowed with pride, was earned. The community poured soul, sweat, muscles and brain power into lifting the Festival upward each year on the last full weekend in July. It represented the epitome of organization and execution. Small-town Americana at its finest.

We served garlic ice cream and people lined up to get a taste. Hah, who would have thought! We inspired fest-goers to wear goofy garlic hats and dance like nobody was watching. Our "pyro chefs" - really just backyard cooks unconcerned about keeping

hair on their arms and eyebrows - charmed the crowds and the TV cameras with the quintessential Festival flame-ups which licked the tin roofs. We prepared delicious, satisfying plates of pasta con pesto, calamari and pepper steak sandwiches from a massive kitchen laden with volunteers with one goal: please the patrons. We spread happiness and frivolity. We waved our magic Gilroy garlic wand and it all came together because we willed it, because we worked it.

If you grew up in Gilroy, you did something: sold programs, worked the information booth, hauled away trash. Youth church groups, the Gilroy Gators swim team, community service agencies - you name it - everyone willing to pitch in received a piece of the pie. Millions of dollars have been distributed to community groups.

The work yielded joy.

Marriage proposals were made on stages to cheering throngs. Music and garlic mingled in the air, dancing like happy spirits in a Chagall painting. Magic happened at the Great Gilroy Garlic Festival every year. People came from around the world - literally. Every year the Gilroy Dispatch staff members "competed" to find the people who came from the furthest away to attend. The list dotted the globe. Garlic princesses from Gilroy and our sister city in Japan graced Christmas Hill Park with waves, smiles and laugh-inducing skits. We wrote stories about couples who met at the Festival and kept coming back each year. We poked fun at some "bad Fest fashion." And we profiled hundreds of volunteers through the years talking about their dedication and motivation.

We are proud can-do Gilroyans, still strong but severely wounded. Our Festival, the one 4,000 or so volunteers have answered the civic call for each and every year for the past 41 years is forever tainted and our community identity compromised.

"Where are you from?"

"Gilroy, south of San Jose near Monterey."

"Oh, Gilroy ... that's garlic, right? Are you a garlic farmer? ..."

Anywhere you traveled that delightful conversation would bring a smile and serve as an opener.

"No, not a farmer, but we volunteer every year. You should come. It's always the last weekend in July and all the money goes to charity. Friday's the best day if you don't like crowds."

Show me a city that sustains, nurtures and grows a community event for four decades and multiple generations and I'll show you a community filled with people willing to make a difference, people who deeply care. Sure, we squabble every year about what would make it even better. But those squabbles pale in comparison to the overwhelming success of the best food fest ever.

From the Board of Directors to the folks who handle resurrecting the vast infrastructure like tents and electricity every year, everyone except the executive director is a volunteer. It's an incredible undertaking, a massive community barn-raising if you will.

That a deranged, homegrown young man would plot to decimate what the community has built, sowing fear and tragedy where joy and frivolity reigned, is unfathomable.

Amazingly, three Gilroy police officers engaged the hell-bent 19-year-old gunman almost immediately. In less than one minute, our police chief reported, the shooter's planned rampage ended as did his life.

While it is little comfort to those who lost loved ones or for those who endured the gut-wrenching moments fearing for their lives, the GPD officers heroically saved the day. Hundreds more could have been maimed or killed. We look forward to honoring them for their brave actions and rapid, professional response to the worst situation imaginable.

As we mourn, the question of "What now?" rises. Answers will unfold slowly. Three young people have been shot and killed at our festival: Trevor Irby, 25; Keyla

Salazar, 13, and Stephen Romero, just 6 years old.

The widely distributed photograph of Stephen - dressed in that cute "Birthday Dude" t-shirt celebrating his birthday at Legoland and smiling from ear to ear - delivers blow after blow, and our tears flow.

Mark Derry is the former editor of the Gilroy Dispatch. He has lived in Gilroy for 40 years, and is married to a lifelong Gilroyan. To donate to a Gilroy Foundation community charitable fund to provide relief to victims visit

<http://gilroyfoundation.org/give/donate.php>

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