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Orlando massacre: We must not be bystanders

by LORI R. WEINTROB, ROBIN LEFKOWITZ and VICTOR & KIM AVIS

We join with our neighbors and communities around the world in condemning and grieving the violent murder of forty-nine Americans, and the injury to countless others. We are deeply saddened by the painful loss of life in this Orlando nightclub, a place of joy, empowerment and a safe haven to the LGBTQ community. Orlando, like New York and many other places around the globe, is a city of dreams and diversity. Their loss is ours too.

Each day our children pledge allegiance to “liberty and justice for all.” There is no liberty or freedom where there is fear. We pledge to honor by our actions the memory of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals senselessly murdered. We take responsibility to promote openness and inclusiveness, the basic values of humanity. “Hope is never silent,” said Harvey Milk, the first openly gay American elected official, before he was silenced by a bullet. We must not be silent. We must not be bystanders.

How can we find the courage to end hate and violence? We must look to our neighbors and within ourselves to fight intolerance and promote mutual respect. Reflecting on the shadow cast by discrimination and persecution, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel remarked: “Hope and peace are not God’s gift to his creatures, it is our gift to each other.” The Talmud says, “Talmidei Chuchamim marbin shalom Baolam” — “It is the wise men who will bring about peace.” We commit to end the targeting of those who are different from us. We commit to strengthening the regulation of weapons of destruction. With courage, we will inspire this wisdom and humanity in others. We must not be bystanders.

The Holocaust Education Center at Wagner College is committed to awakening future generations to the ramifications of prejudice, anti-Semitism, racism and persecution of any kind. Through education, we seek to further knowledge and understanding as well as foster tolerance, peace and positive action. We are proud to work with those of all faiths, races, abilities, sexual orientation and other differences, including Muslim community members. In the Holocaust, six million Jews and millions of non-Jews, including homosexuals and lesbians, were killed. Individuals of all faiths, races and sexual orientation were among those who resisted and rescued others.

Although this event was seventy years ago, perpetrators of hatred continue to haunt our landscape. Only active engagement in understanding each other and the lessons of our past offers hope to move forward. We must cross boundaries of difference and encourage others to do so as well. In addition, we must fight for changing laws that allow those filled with hatred to gain easy access to powerful weapons. We must not be bystanders.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences,” said New York State Poet Laureate Audre Lorde. Lorde was a mother, Afro-Caribbean lesbian, feminist writer and self-declared “warrior” who lived fifteen years on Staten Island (1972-87). Her courage echoed across the globe as she spoke out for love and community. She is a role model on our Island of many voices, in our world of many choices.

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