

Free Press Viewpoint

Community tackles wave of vandalism

It's disappointing to see your town make headlines around the state because of a crime.

Colby awoke Tuesday morning to find more than 160 headstones toppled over or damaged at our public cemetery, and newspapers and television stations as away far as Wichita have picked up the story.

People have been filtering through the cemetery the rest of the week, looking to see if their family's stones were among those vandalized. Many are shocked that anyone in this peaceful small town would do such a thing.

This is not the only recent instance of seriously destructive or blatantly disrespectful vandalism. On July 31, vandals caused around \$6,000 worth of damage at the golf course, going so far as to push a golf cart off a bridge.

In January, someone was caught on a web cam stealing a wooden lamb and other pieces from a nativity scene in Fike Park. In February, a wave of vandalism, including broken mailboxes, trash dumped in ditches, knocked-over road signs and cut-down trees prompted police to offer a \$500 reward.

Some of the incidents could be related, even perpetrated by the same people. It takes planning and dedication to cut down trees and push over headstones. That's probably what makes some of these crimes so unthinkable to many people: these things took a coordinated effort. Vandalism is more often an impulsive crime of opportunity, and vandals often do damage that doesn't take a lot of effort, like grabbing a lawn gnome or spray painting a building.

What is heartening is how much people we talk to want to help put this bad situation right. The Boy Scouts and other groups, plus many individuals, are planning to show up Monday to help put the stones back in proper order.

The cemetery district board, in particular, should be praised for how the members have handled the situation. They're paying out of district funds to bring in companies to help put the stones back up, even though they operate with a tight budget. They've also offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

So how do we move forward? We think it's well past time to revive the antiquated notion of community pride. We need to instill in our youths the concept that this is their town, and what happens in it affects them. It could be as simple as encouraging them to pick up trash on the sidewalk or as complicated as a 100-hour service project.

We should encourage our children to join civic groups like the Boy and Girl Scouts, to take care of school buildings and homes, to treat the other people and their property with respect.

And most important, we as adults must remember how important it is to lead by example. — Kevin Bottrell

Write us

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COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. (USPS 120-920) (785) 462-3963
Colby, Kan. 67701 fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor@nwkansan.com

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

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THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby, Thomas County and Oakley: three months \$35, one year \$85. By mail to ZIP Codes beginning with 676 and 677: three months \$39, one year \$95. Elsewhere in the U.S., mailed once per week: three months \$39, one year \$95. Student rate, nine months, in Colby, Thomas County and Oakley, \$64; mailed once per week elsewhere in the U.S. \$72

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How do we think about cemeteries?

The vandalism at Beulah Cemetery this week has been cussed and discussed in this office, as I'm sure it has in most places folks gather around town.

Speculation as to the motives and personality of the perpetrators abounds. The involvement of drugs or alcohol, the possibility of anger against the dead or the cemetery officials or the community at large, comparisons with other instances of vandalism recently — all these and more have been bounced around with no real answers in sight.

I have to confess, though, that the level of personal anger expressed by those with no personal investment in this particular cemetery is cause for bemusement. This is anger specifically related to the fact that the damage was done in the community's cemetery, as opposed to a park or a series of businesses. Or in other words, it's not so much anger at vandalism per se as it is anger at vandalism in a cemetery.

As one of those whose relatives are all buried elsewhere, I'm saddened by the vandalism, but I can't take it personally. In fact, Beulah cemetery is maintained at a far higher level than the various rural cemeteries in which I have a personal stake. Of course, those isolated areas are more likely to have a cow or two come through the fence than to suffer any kind of human insult.

And the "insult" factor is probably the critical issue here. Yes, there is a big financial



Marian Ballard

Collection Connections

component as well as many hours of hard labor, in restoring, repairing or removing those headstones that have been displaced or damaged. Conversations about it, though, seem to all come around to the "what a horrible thing to do to a cemetery" point. The next line is usually "How would they feel if it was their parents."

All of which says to me that the real issue to the community comes down to the idea of desecration of graves.

The response to death has varied a lot over the years and among various cultures, but the present ideal in this part of the world seems to center around burial in a neat, well-maintained, well-watered cemetery. Some cemeteries have banished tall headstones entirely, in favor of ones that a lawn mover can drive over.

Burial practices have varied enormously over the millennia, of course, ranging from the pyramids of ancient Egypt to the burning boats of the Vikings to the above ground crypts of New Orleans today.

Practices surrounding death have changed as well. We are less acquainted with death as a constant presence in this age of prenatal care, vaccinations against childhood illness, and medical treatment that prolongs the lives of many with chronic illnesses. We are further separated from intimate acquaintance with death with the rise of the funeral industry, which removes us from the personal tasks performed at home by our ancestors, like building caskets and washing and dressing the body after death.

Is our separation from these details a factor in our shock? A vandal crossed a line we would never cross. The response seems like that to grave robbers in earlier centuries, incorporating horror at the violation of a resting place.

Some of those most horrified, I suspect, are the same people who would seldom, if ever, visit a grave of a loved one. They feel a barrier, and would never cross it, for good or evil.

Some feel personally insulted, as if a vandal had attacked their own homes.

Some of us are just sad, and puzzled, and concerned about this further indication of thoughtlessness in the world.

Marian Ballard has collected careers as counselor, librarian, pastor, and now copy editor for the Colby Free Press. She collects ideas, which are more portable than other stuff.

Infant mortality needs a deeper look

Why is the infant mortality problem in Kansas so bad, and why isn't it getting better?

Why have deaths among Kansas babies under age 1 increased by 16 percent since 2000, pushing our state's rank to No. 40 among the 50 states, according to a report released in late July by the Annie E. Casey Foundation?

Why does the black infant mortality rate in Kansas remain at double the white rate? Why does a black baby born in Kansas today have less chance of surviving to its first birthday than a baby born in the refugee camps of the Palestinian territories in the Middle East?

And finally, why can't the good people living in the heartland of the richest nation on earth solve this problem and do better for our littlest, most vulnerable citizens?

These are tough questions, questions that weigh heavily on the minds of compassionate people from all walks of life who have mobilized in recent years to fight infant mortality around our state.

Many of these dedicated people serve on the state's Blue Ribbon Panel on Infant Mortality, convened last year by the secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment after discussion with the governor's office.

For panel members, these are the questions that keep them up at night.

In one sense, the answers to such questions are obvious. Infants are dying in Kansas because too many of their mothers today have



Jason Eberhart-Phillips

Kansas Health Officer

been marginalized in lives of poverty.

Undervalued by the larger society, sometimes stigmatized by racism, and often unloved by their own families, many young women whose babies are dying have arrived at their pregnancies ill-prepared for the responsibilities of motherhood.

Lacking the social support that every young person needs, these women are more likely while pregnant to smoke tobacco, drink alcohol, use drugs, eat an inadequate diet and suffer from domestic violence. They often miss out on prenatal care.

The result too often is a baby who is born too small, or delivered too young, or with congenital defects that cannot be overcome.

So the social factors at the root of our state's infant mortality problem aren't really a mystery. What's difficult to figure out is how to fix the problem when there are no easy answers.

How do we make it easier for every woman in our state to get the social support she needs to face the challenges of pregnancy?

How do we lead her to find good foods to eat, to avoid tobacco, alcohol and other drugs — before, during and after pregnancy — and to escape from abusive situations?

How do we remove the barriers for her to access early and regular prenatal care as a fundamental right of all mothers-to-be?

These are the tough questions. They ask us to place a higher value on the health, safety and well-being of young women than we have been doing lately.

They ask us to look beyond ourselves and open our hearts to our neighbors in need.

Improving the lot of poor young women in our state will be expensive, though not as costly as ignoring the problem. Currently at the Department of Health and Environment, we are applying for federal money to establish a home visiting program in our neediest communities, where nurses and other professionals will offer support to women and young children at highest risk.

Such programs are a start. But our state's infant mortality problem won't go away until we all get serious about the social conditions behind it.

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Mallard Fillmore

- Bruce Tinsley

