Alexander J. Dessler
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THE HIGHLAND PARK JULY 4TH TRAGEDY
THE COMMUNITY INTERACTIVE FORUM

By Dr. Mark Nolan Hill | Photos by Joe Greenberg

An engaging, passionate, and sensitive community sponsored interactive forum addressing the effects, sequelae, and healing approaches in the aftermath of the Highland Park July 4th shooting was well-attended on December 7 at Northwood Middle School Auditorium in Highland Park.

An unprecedented consortium of three internationally well-known and respected keynote speakers donated their time and services to speak in Highland Park in their respective areas of expertise.

**Scarlett Lewis** presented her “Choose Love Movement” which she founded when her son Jesse was murdered at the Sandy Hook elementary school tragedy in 2012. Ms. Lewis is an activist, advocate, speaker and author who has dedicated her life to being part of the solution to the issues that led to the Sandy Hook shooting, and subsequent issues, as well as others we see including the Highland Park tragedy, in our society. Her Choose Love program promotes hope, healing, and connection through comprehensive social and emotional development. Her program has been accessed in all 50 states and 120 countries. She is a Forbes “50 over 50” Honoree, had an audience with President Biden, and recently seen in the media by being given a platform to speak during the Alex Jones trials.

Ms. Lewis came to Highland Park straightaway after the July 4th tragedy, where she met with the artist who designed the temporary memorial, and also left a personal note for the victims at the memorial. While here for the Forum, she met personally with one of the family members of a victim of the shooting.

At the Forum, she stated that understandably people can develop a fear based reaction, and can shut down after a tragedy. However, she stressed that healing requires the courage to step outside of our own pain, and ask for and offer help. She continued that pain can be an opportunity for growth with forgiveness and compassion. “Care and love those who you want to love the least, and when you help others, you help and heal yourself. Be part of the solution.”

She shared that after her son Jesse was murdered, “her life stopped”, and the pain was so great that she thought she would die. However, she subsequently modeled her life for her other son, JT, and all others— including prisoners and shooters, and used “nurturing, healing, and love” as the backbone of her Choose Love program. She showed a very touching video of her son Jesse, which moved everyone greatly in the audience.

**Dr. Edward Barksdale, Jr.** presented his “Antifragility Initiative” which he founded, and is a pediatric violence intervention funded by the Victims of Crime Act. Dr. Barksdale is a pediatric surgeon, Professor, and Surgeon-in Chief at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine Rainbow Babies and Children Hospital in Cleveland. His program is centered on the premise that children and families who have experienced major traumas due to violence benefit greatly from

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18 JANUARY 2023
coordinated support as they begin to heal and reorder their lives.

Dr. Barksdale met with President Biden at the White House to celebrate the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, and President Biden described him as “an inspirational leader and champion for racial equity, healthcare, and well-being.”

He stated “I rely on matriarchal and ancestral wisdom from my background that stated that not everyone can be cured, but all can be healed”.

He spoke that “common unity” is more important than “community”, and stressed that one should “wear your scars boldly. That when you realize the hurt, you can wrap your arms around it”. He continued stressing the need to break the cycle of revenge into forgiveness, and that “broken people” who are put back together are stronger. To this point, he uses an analogy to the Japanese pottery known as kintsugi. This pottery has cracks that are filled with gold epoxy, which makes them more beautiful and stronger, once broken and fixed, than it was before.

Kathryn Goetzke presented her “Hopeful Cities and Hopeful Minds” - a free evidence based program, in which she founded, to teach the “how” to hope. Ms. Goetzke is an advocate, speaker, author, and entrepreneur, who recently was appointed as a representative at the United Nations for their World Federation for Mental Health. Her program is dedicated to shining a positive light on mental health and eliminating the stigma through prevention, research and education.

Ms. Goetzke stated that hopelessness is predictive of loneliness with negative expectations towards oneself and the future. However, she stated, by “relearning” in recognizing that hope represents feelings and actions, we can change our brain responses and patterns. She stresses to be kind, and to create cultures and communities to be involved.

“Hope is a vision, fueled by positive feelings and inspired actions”. She spoke of neuroplasticity - the brain’s ability to re-wire and retrain itself to focus on happiness, especially important in times of distress. “Healing can be a long process have patience with self and others. Hope is not easy, and we may have to change what we hope for and that is hard. We must use our emotions, not against self or others, but as fuel for change, and it is important to reach out for support”.

Dr. Mark Hill, a surgeon, Professor, and forty-one-year resident of Highland Park initiated, coordinated, and moderated this community Forum. This came about when he was presenting a surgical paper at a medical meeting several weeks after the July 4th tragedy, and the keynote speaker, Dr. Barksdale, spoke on community violence, instead of a typical surgical subject. Dr. Barksdale’s presentation was remarkable, and engaged the entire audience. Dr. Hill approached him afterwards, and informed him he was from Highland Park, and Dr. Barksdale was well aware of the shooting. He took great interest, and directed Dr. Hill to contact his good friend Scarlett Lewis who he did. And then Scarlett Lewis put Dr. Hill in touch with Kathryn Goetzke.

Dr. Hill said that although he has taken care of hundreds of patients with gunshot wounds (now in his forty- first year of practice), he never thought this Highland Park tragedy would happen in his “backyard”. He stressed the effects it has had personally as well as on the entire community, and shared a story: after Thanksgiving, Carol Sue (his wife) and him were visiting Galena - a small “Andy of Mayberry” charming Illinois small town - where they were having a “pre-Christmas” parade. Dr. Hill noticed his wife looking up at the tops of the 1800’s era buildings, and he asked her “what are you looking at?” His wife stated “the roofs”, and Dr. Hill asked why, and she stated “because that is what happened in Highland Park”.

He stated that a patient brought him a publication which said not to use words like “healing and recovery”, as “this will precipitate undue anxiety”. Moreover, Dr. Hill was also told by one of the sponsors of his pop band (Dr. Mark and the Sutures) prior to a performance, that he should not play any “melancholy” songs, for the same reasons. Dr. Hill respectfully disagrees with this approach, and believes that healing and recovery, along with empathy and compassion, require sharing appropriate interpersonal communication and interaction for emotional healing.

Dr. Hill especially acknowledged the EMT’s and paramedics, and stated “that they are the ones who really save the day-in expediously transporting and in-ambulance resuscitation to get the patient to definitive treatment in the trauma hospital”.

Mayor Leon Rockingham (North Chicago)- whose officer apprehended the shooting suspect also commented about the prevalence of these types of violent events and their effect on everyone.

Dr. Charles Martinez (Director of the Free Old Irving Park Community Clinic, which Dr. Hill volunteers once a week when able) asked the three speakers about how persons who may have thoughts or intentions of precipitating these violent actions, can be identified beforehand. This stimulated much discussion.

Finally, after two and a half hours, the Forum concluded with great appreciation from the community.

Acknowledgements were made to Highland Park Chief of Police Lou Jogmen and Highland Park Fire Chief Joe Schrage, both of whom could not attend because of prior commitments. Dr. Bruce Law (Superintendent District 113) greatly facilitated publicity, and Senator Julie Morrison, Congressman Brad Schneider, and State Representative Bob Morgan also assisted in this event. A special acknowledgement was made to Rick Strusiner, the owner of Port Clinton Square (where the actual shooting took place) who was the major financial sponsor providing the travel expenses of the three keynote speakers.

Of note, Dr. Mike Lubelfeld will provide a link to the Forum’s video recording for those who were unable to attend.