

Where American Politics Can Still Work: From the Bottom Up

LANCASTER, PA. — Last week I wrote about why political parties across the industrial world are fracturing from the top down. Today I'm writing about the political units that are working. On this Fourth of July, if you want to be an optimist about America, stand on your head. The country looks so much better from the bottom up.

I know — the current cliché is that we're a country divided by two coasts, two coasts that are supposedly diversifying, pluralizing, modernizing and globalizing, while in flyover America everyone is high on opioids, cheering for President Trump and waiting for 1950 to return. That's totally wrong.

Our country is actually a checkerboard of cities and communities — some that are forming what I call “complex adaptive coalitions” and are thriving from the bottom up, and others that can't build adaptive coalitions and are rapidly deteriorating. You can find both on the coasts and in the interior — and you can find both in one little corner of south-central Pennsylvania.

I was invited in April to give a paid book talk here in Lancaster, and I was so blown away by the societal innovation the town's leaders had employed to rebuild their once-struggling city and county that I decided to return with my reporter's notebook and interview them.

My original host was the Hourglass, a foundation founded by community leaders in Lancaster County in 1997, when the city of Lancaster was a crime-ridden ghost town at night where people were afraid to venture and when the county's dominant industrial employer, Armstrong World Industries, was withering.

Some of the leading citizens decided that “time was running out” — hence “Hourglass” — and that no cavalry was coming to save them — not from the state's capital or the nation's capital. They realized that the only way they could replace Armstrong and re-energize the downtown was not with another dominant company, but by throwing partisan politics out the window and forming a complex adaptive coalition in which business leaders, educators, philanthropists, social innovators and the local government would work together to unleash entrepreneurship and forge whatever compromises were necessary to fix the city.

Pretty much the exact opposite of what's happening in Washington today.

At 7:30 Friday morning in early June, the Hourglass leaders in Lancaster were all sitting around the kitchen table at Art Mann Sr.'s house, as they do every Friday. The seven men and women representing different Lancaster societal and business

interests were discussing the region's shortage of clean water, because of farm runoff, fertilizer and salt on the streets.

None of the seven is in city government or is an elected politician; they're just respected volunteer community activists who will make a recommendation, based on research, to the city or county to get a problem fixed and help galvanize resources to do it. They all know one another's party affiliation, but they've checked them at Mann's front door.

“The key to it all is trust,” Mann explained to me. “Politically we are all different, and our experiences are different. You can only get progress where there is trust.”

As the breakfast wore on, I was reminded of the business philosopher Dov Seidman's dictum that “trust is the only legal performance-enhancing drug.” And I recalled Israeli societal innovator Gidi Grinstein's dictum that what is saving so many communities today is “leadership without authority — so many people stepping up to lead beyond their formal authority.”

The Lancaster ethic was best described to me by Ray D'Agostino, president of the Lancaster Housing & Opportunity Partnership, one of myriad young societal entrepreneurs I met here.

“There is big P politics — party politics — and small P politics,” said D'Agostino. “We check the big P at the door and just worry about solving the issues — not worrying about what Republicans or Democrats think about it.”

When visitors from nearby York, Reading or Harrisburg — communities not doing so well — see what's happening here, “this is all foreign to them,” he said. “I tell them: ‘You don't know how to collaborate. You're still working in silos.’” When a leader from York told him: “Ray, you know, we take care of our own. We're doing things our way,” D'Agostino answered, “Maybe that's part of the problem.”

Many locals say the turnaround began in the early 2000s, when Lancaster got the chance to have a minor-league baseball team and stadium.

The momentum for change really picked up, though, around 2006 when a dynamic new mayor was elected, J. Richard Gray, who worked with the Hourglass team, local business leaders and societal

innovators to take Lancaster to a new level. Gray, who paved the way for a convention center and Marriott Hotel in the heart of the city, describes himself as a “Democratic capitalist,” which, he said, means: support businesses to invest in town — because there are no employees without employers — make sure they pay people a living wage and don't damage the environment. It was a balance a lot of locals of all political stripes found appealing.

By February 2018, a month after Gray stepped down after three terms as mayor, Lancaster was named by *Forbes* as one of the “10 Coolest U.S. Cities to Visit,” explaining: It “boasts a bustling food scene and is quickly becoming a cultural hotbed.

Volunteers are succeeding where governments failed.

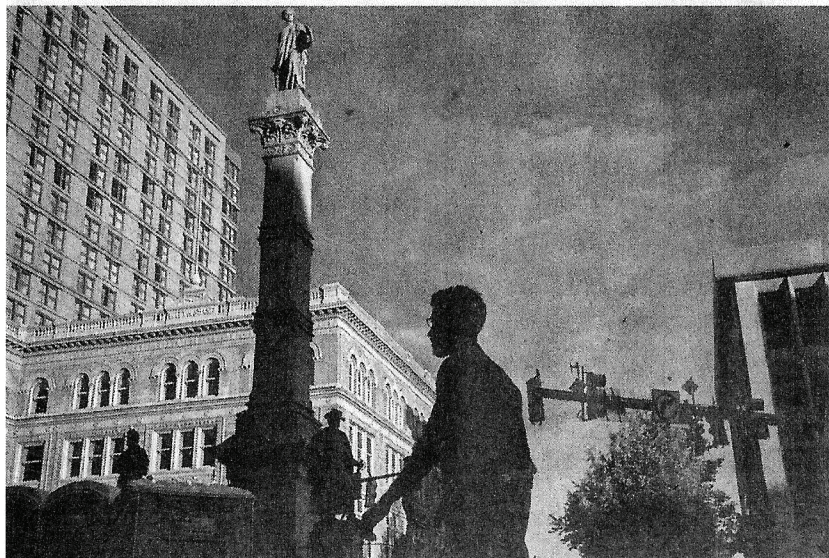
The architecture is the real star, so explore the alleys and cobblestone streets by foot, checking out the many repurposed old warehouses that house thriving businesses.”

But for all its progress digging itself out of a deep hole — by bridging political divides — racial divides and policing issues are alive in Lancaster, just like in other cities.

Last Thursday a white Lancaster police officer used a Taser on a 27-year-old black man who was sitting on a curb during an arrest — which he did not appear to be resisting. A bystander's video of the tasing has amassed more than two million views on Facebook. It's quite disturbing.

The new mayor, Danene Sorace, who has ordered an investigation, told me, “The progress Lancaster has made in recent years is too precious a thing for us not to respond to this incident in a meaningful way . . . and with systemic changes that we were already working on.”

In other words, this is not nirvana. What differentiates Lancaster from its neighbors is the degree to which it built a complex adaptive coalition to save the city from terminal decline, the resources this has created to try to bridge its still tough economic and racial divides — and the sheer number of people here who want to get caught trying. □



DAMON WINTER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Marriott Hotel helped turn downtown Lancaster, Pa., into a destination.