

# A Day of Caring

October 14, 2019

You could say it was a colossal, although delightful, failure of separation of church and state. The guilty parties were a half-dozen houses of worship in Barrington, RI, several community groups, and municipal employees under Barrington town manager Jim Cunha.

The wonderfully successful project was called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Barrington Day of Caring and it took place under the perfect skies of Columbus Day. The idea was simple. Bring genuine relief to nine town residents who needed things the town couldn't supply and the residents couldn't afford. Think roof repair, demolition and LOTS of yard work.

In other words, good old fashioned sweat and labor.

Donning bright orange t-shirts for safety, the group also included many volunteers who learned of the event from word of mouth. Together with contractors, plumbers, and, yes, kids of every age (from age 10 to 80-plus) they set about their work. About a hundred people participated or helped organize the day.

And even the planning was special.

A few weeks before Columbus Day a barrage of identical lawn signs simultaneously appeared on the property of all the churches and the Barrington Town Hall. They carried simple, yet bold messages of encouragement like "Don't Give Up" and "You Matter" while subtly advertising event specifics.

Refreshingly, the legality of the ubiquitous signs was never challenged and instead of generating complaints from area residents they drew, instead, many compliments.

The work itself was splendidly diverse – and meaningful. One elderly resident, facing upkeep of a home in her family for generations, watched with great wonder as six kids under the age of twelve - properly supervised and lavishly outfitted with gloves, masks and utility knives - ripped into and removed decades-old carpet from a neglected room, revealing a newly-liberated floor.

The gang then asked the delighted homeowner if they could move on to cleaning her bathroom!

Carpenters repaired decks, plumbers fixed faucets, and the scent of fresh paint filled forgotten rooms.

Meanwhile, a formidable armada of busses from the Bayside Family YMCA made sure that snacks and supplies were refreshed and that tired workers were shuttled back to their rendezvous point. The event clicked with an almost military-like precision.

A wonderful trend emerged at all the sites. People who only hours before were strangers began exchanging contact information with one another. Toward the end of the day, it was warm embraces that were being exchanged; as overwhelmed property owners could no longer hide the profound gratitude they felt for the little army of volunteers – now friends.

“But a speck of hope in a world thick with despair!” the cynic may rightly observe about the strange partnering of church and state on a beautiful Columbus Day in Barrington. Perhaps. But then, rumor has it that the town of Bristol is already planning their own Day of Caring...

Ultimately, the Day reminds us anew that the noble in all of us – even Rhode Islanders! - can be stirred in an instant, and more, how stubborn stereotypes, like aloof pew-sitters and disinterested municipal workers, all but disappear beneath the misty eyes of a grateful resident surrounded by an orange army of former strangers.

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