

## Our City

It's hard for most.

Why as an "intelligent" species *Homo sapiens* have such difficulty accepting differences within themselves I do not understand. If you watch or read the news at all you will recognize my reference both globally and nationally; whether it is from the University of Missouri, the streets of France or the oppressed countries worldwide. As a species, people are not very tolerant of those different from themselves and when asked to accept and respect those differences, it's extremely hard if not impossible for many.

What may surprise you to know is that intolerance and disrespect have become increasingly prevalent at American Falls High School. No, it is not rampant, yet it is certainly disruptive to the educational processes within our walls and my fear is it will spread beyond. You may think I am full of hot air or something else; that is your prerogative, but let me explain before you judge completely.

In last Friday's AFHS faculty leadership meeting, a student was invited to participate. The student was somebody I have known for a very long time. I taught the student, the student's parents and at one point lived next to them and to the student's grandparents. The student was definitely taught right from wrong. The student's concern was founded in the lack of respect many of our students have for their teachers and classmates. Similar concerns recently have been brought to the attention of the administration by other students as well. While I don't see it in my classroom very often, it does happen. Case in point last Wednesday afternoon. But, before I get to that I need to tell you about Wednesday morning and the Veteran's Day assembly coordinated by our awesome student body president, Alexa Barrett.

Alexa had invited several veterans to attend the assembly; two of whom spoke to the student body. The assembly started with the Star Spangled Banner. Most students stood and of those many placed their hands over their hearts. Some removed their hats and some did not. Some sang and some did not. Truthfully, it was a fair representation of where I believe we are as a society and frankly, as a species.

Our own Ron Ellis, a Vietnam veteran, spoke first after the National Anthem. Mr. Ellis spoke of his service, sacrifice and loss during the Vietnam War. He spoke of the loss of one of his best friend also from American Falls. And then he went on to explain why he fought for "us" and what his service meant to him. Sadly, I think it was lost on many of the students. Many have no concept of that level of sacrifice and service. They have no deeply rooted reference for what it means to be an American. Nor do they appreciate or respect the sacrifices of those who have served and died to protect the freedoms they blatantly take for granted as was evidenced during the National Anthem. Make no mistake our children reflect us as clearly as a mirror.

In concluding, Mr. Ellis introduced Isaac "Feets" Jensen. Feets' service to his country took place in Iraq where he served in the Army as a combat medic. His active military service ended when he and two of his squad were blown up while clearing a house in an Iraqi village. While missing the use of both legs and one arm, he still managed to save his two comrades. A pin could have dropped and you would have heard it if it wasn't for the sound of some students playing games on their phones as Feets delivered his initial message. Make no

mistake, our children reflect us as clearly as a mirror. And then Feets called out everyone that was being disrespectful. The ones who failed to stand during the anthem, the ones who stood but left their hats on, the ones who chose not to cover their heart with their right hand, the ones who mindlessly played on their phones, were all called out. And, I finally heard the pin drop as he began to talk about respect and why he chose to enlist and fight for our country and what he wanted in return, what all veterans want in return. Respect.

Feets and the millions like him simply want respect. Respect, not sympathy or pity. Respect, not a “thank you for your service.” “No words are needed to show respect,” Feets said, “A simple sincere hand shake will do. For, your actions speak louder than words. How you treat ‘everyone’ reflects the respect you have for me and other veterans, service men and women. Respect everyone!” It resonated throughout the student body and faculty, or at least I thought it did, as we all stood in standing ovation as the Iraqi War veteran Isaac “Feets” Jensen closed his remarks. It was pretty cool to see the transformation in our students, but it was fleeting for some.

As the day progressed, I sensed a bit of a somber change in many of my students. Then it all came crashing down as a Latina freshman came to me with tears in her eyes and said that one of the white males in class had told her and others like her to get the “F” out of his country. Make no mistake our children reflect us as clearly as a mirror.

It is hard for most students to act towards others differently than they have been taught by their parents. I was raised under the premise of the Golden Rule and while I fail at living it sometimes I do my very best to let it guide me always. I am not perfect, but I don’t intentionally treat others differently than I would like to be treated. These words from the Declaration of Independence came to mind as I listened to “Feets” speak and I reflected back on them as I addressed the offending student in my class, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (1776).” After a class discussion, the boy apologized to the girl with tears still in her eyes; it didn’t take away the hurtful thing he had said but it demonstrated a newfound degree of respect. It was hard for him, no doubt. It would have been hard for most.

As the AFHS leadership meeting drew to an end it was concluded that while we have focused on building a student’s work ethic and growth mind set, “respect for everyone” must also be taught and modeled by faculty and students alike. It should not be hard. It is the premise upon which this country is founded and it is what is asked of all of us by those who choose service above self, by those who sacrificed willingly that we might live free, by those who gave ultimately that we have the right to freely choose respect – that we might have the right and ability to freely treat our fellow man as we would like to be treated. Men and women for hundreds of years have served, fought and died that we might have that choice. It should not be a hard one.

We in American Falls are a microcosm of the nation and our world. But we are a part. As a community, let us choose to “respect everyone” that we might make American Falls truly the best place to live.

Until next week...