



Letters to the editor, Oct. 24



Reasons to protest

I am not a demonstrator. And when I do protest, my full presence is often interrupted by self-consciousness: sometimes it's ambivalence about the cause, or a questioning of the effectiveness of demonstrating. So let's just say I was more than a bit surprised that as a consequence of the force of my clap (read: big hands = loud) and the volume of my chant (you don't have to say it: loud talker) I came to observe myself leading, sans megaphone, an emboldened call and response chant from the back of the fray just a few weeks ago on Broad Street in Newark.

I feel an urgency to reflect publicly on this experience, to write a protest editorial for protestors like me; we who protest sporadically or half-heartedly or not at all. I want to write a love letter to those of us who rarely demonstrate but feel the protest in our hearts when we breathe in the reality of this exquisitely fouled up version of America and don't know what to do about it. This is me. This is us. I've gleaned something from this most recent experience that I've gleaned before and then forgot, and I'm pretty sure it had been revealed to me a dozen times prior as well. It's worth sharing the good news: it is not and should not be our responsibility alone to solve the world's problems and yet, the solutions to the world's problems are contingent on our showing up to call them out and to bear witness to suffering.

The demonstration happened on Oct. 3, a rainy Thursday afternoon. We assembled to speak against the human rights abuses of our government against immigrants and the blood money collected in Essex County

for housing detainees in our jail. We were cold, it was damp. We formed a human chain and stopped traffic on Broad Street in Newark at rush hour. Some were arrested.

Protesting is awkward. I can name a thousand reasons, or maybe 14, why you would be inclined not to do it. Reason No. 3 is that you don't have one one-hundredth the experience of an actual immigrant fighting discrimination or deportation and yet you need to stand next to this person and find something to chat about between rallying cries. Reason No. 12 is that the neo-nazis with bandanas over their faces might kick your ass on your way back to the car. I'm not proud of the awkwardness and I consider myself fortunate to be able to embrace the fact that the awkwardness itself is an implicit acknowledgement of extreme privilege. I'm white and rich. The last thing that made me want to write congress was the cost of my health insurance premium. My back ain't exactly up against the wall.

So sure, it's awkward. And that's also reason No. 416 to do it. In the awkwardness lies the truth if we're brave enough to face it. Mine is that I'm basically a shy privileged white man who has nothing in common with the person who cleans the halls of my kid's school or mows my neighbor's lawn but feels compelled to say something about the debasement of this person and their family. To feel it and not act when an opportunity presents is a failure of democracy. You don't need to find your voice as a protestor before you go to the demonstration. You find your voice as a protestor at the demonstration. And if you don't, you can still bear witness and stand with the person whose back really is up against a wall.

This is not the advice of someone who learned the lesson, this is coming from a person who needs to relearn the lesson each day. People of conscience let's be seekers together. Let's bear witness to suffering and use our voices together. Let's pray more with our feet.

DAVID GAYNES

Montclair

In solidarity with Shant'a

Last week I was waiting my turn at the hair salon, scrolling my Facebook while I found a post on a page I am part of called Conversations on Race-Montclair. Someone posted a Facebook Live video that Shant'a Tia Sawyer had posted on Oct. 8 after leaving the Montclair YMCA, where she and her family are members.

As I was listening to her, I started feeling agitated and enraged. She was describing an incident of "microaggression" as Shant'a called it or plain racism that African Americans suffer on a daily basis. The (white) woman asked her "Do you live around here?" When Shant'a said that she lives in Newark, the woman started inquiring about how long it takes her to get here, and kept making comments about how far it is and even dared to ask her if there is no YMCA in Newark. Shant'a said in her video that there were around 10 adults with their children in the room and that everybody might have been able to listen to this conversation. Although two people said the words "I am sorry," and another person shook his head in solidarity, no one really tried to stop the white woman from continuing her racist comments. We really need more than sympathetic looks and "I am sorry" at this point if we want to eradicate this type of behavior in our

communities. White people need to intervene and stop this type of behavior in its tracks.

Therefore, I propose that the YMCA — which was not responsible for the white woman's behavior but the incident happened in its facility — organize a restorative justice session, where Shant'a, the white woman, people who were that day in the corridor, Y authorities and professionals who knows how to conduct this type of events, give all the opportunity to talk, express their feelings, and explain the pain caused by the woman's words, to make this woman accountable.

White people need to intervene in any way possible. It is a problem that we are all responsible to fix.

Shant'a you are welcome in Montclair. Please come back.

MARIA EVA DORIGO

Montclair

Response to letter on Mount Carmel Church

I am writing in response to Tom Russo's letter in the Oct.17 Montclair Local.

For the record, the Rev. Benny Prado never advised parishioners to "boycott" the tricky tray fundraiser.

This is exactly what he posted in the bulletin: "We appreciate and are grateful for all community contributions to support St. Teresa of Calcutta Parish. However it is important to note that the tricky tray event for Nov. 3 sponsored by Religion and More, Inc. and the Community Outreach Program, which is promoted as a fundraiser for Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, is not sponsored or authorized by our parish and therefore, we cannot ensure where donations are contributed. If you have any questions, please contact the office."

CATHERINE MULROE

Montclair

Turtle Back Zoo thrives with new amphitheater

It has been almost 25 years since a large crowd of children, parents and teachers gathered in the parking lot at Essex County Turtle Back Zoo to save this treasure from being closed. Today, Turtle Back is a thriving, dynamic destination where our 900,000 visitors annually see endangered species and learn about conservation and the importance of animals.

When I was serving as freeholder president, the blue ribbon panel I commissioned to study the zoo recognized its potential as an educational and recreational facility and recommended it be kept open. Since I became

Essex County executive in 2003, one of my initiatives has been to transform Turtle Back into a first-class facility. During the last 17 years, we have modernized the infrastructure, created new natural habitat themed animal exhibits and introduced amenities to enhance our visitors' experience.

Our latest project is to create a new amphitheater for educational programs. Our current amphitheater is not conducive to this type of activity and does not have space where animals can be kept before the presentations begin. Therefore, we rely on the four classrooms in our Education Building to present these enrichment programs, which is hardly adequate space to meet our daily needs.

On an average day, we welcome about 2,200 children from various schools and recreation programs, but only have space to provide just 150 students with the opportunity to participate in an enrichment program. In the past, groups that came to the zoo passively learned about the importance of each animal by strolling along the paths, watching the animals and reading the signs. Now there is greater demand for an interactive experience. The planned 500-seat addition will provide the opportunity to significantly increase the audience we currently reach with our educational programming and help satisfy requirements of the three nationally recognized organizations that accredit the zoo.

Like many of our projects, the amphitheater is being partially funded with a grant, this one a special appropriation from the state. Relying on grants, NJ Green Acres funding, corporate and philanthropic contributions, Zoological Society of NJ support and individual donations have enabled us to invest over \$75 million of improvements at Turtle Back Zoo without placing a large burden on our taxpayers. In fact, the zoo is unique in that it has been a self-sufficient facility for the last decade, meaning the revenue collected from admissions covers operating costs. This fiscal success contributed to Essex County earning its first-ever AAA bond rating, the highest rating available and the gold standard for financial stability and strength.

There have been concerns about the impact the amphitheater will have on the environment. Since 2003, as the zoo has expanded from 30 to 40 acres, we have followed the stringent guidelines set by the NJ Department of Environmental Protection and the NJ Soil Erosion and Sediment Control Act to address runoff and erosion. The retention basins and modern drainage systems we have installed when making improvements help reduce run off and address long-standing flooding issues that existed in South Mountain Reservation long before Turtle Back opened 56 years ago.

In addition, we are estimating that about one acre of land from South Mountain Reservation will be needed for the amphitheater, which is just a small piece when considering the reservation encompasses over 2,200 acres. I am a great proponent of open space preservation: We have increased the number of open spaces in the Essex County Parks System from 17 to 23, planted 20,000 new trees throughout Essex County and preserved over 500 acres in our densely populated county, including adding 55 acres to South Mountain. I believe enhancing our educational component is a reasonable use for the land.

The amphitheater isn't designed to attract more visitors, just to enhance services to those we currently welcome. In addition, a 500-car deck (our third parking facility) opening in December will provide more on-site parking and reduce the number of vehicles parking on Cherry Lane. As I promised, an updated Turtle Back Zoo Master Plan will be completed by year's end.

We have created something special in which all residents of Essex County should take great pride. Along with Turtle Back Zoo, we created the South Mountain Recreation Complex where residents enjoy the walking path around the Orange Reservoir, picnic pavilion, paddle boating and playground. I want Turtle Back Zoo to continue to thrive and, along with the complex, be an attraction that promotes economic development, invigorates the local economy and encourages Essex residents to spend their money where they live. Just like 25 years ago, let's rally in support of Turtle Back Zoo so people of all ages can continue to experience the wonders of the wild, gain an appreciation for animals and become the next generation of environmental stewards.

JOSEPH N. DIVINCENZO JR.

Roseland

The author is the county executive for Essex County.