
Guest Column: It all began with pizza

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In the mid-1960s, my dad served on the school board in Cortez, in rural southern Colorado. He recalled that at one meeting he said something a little too liberal because a fellow board member invited him to “step outside.”

Fast forward some 55 years and not much has changed in this town of 8,500 in Montezuma County. Cortez still has its Old West traditions of doing things as they’ve always been done for decades, though more than one quarter of residents are now Hispanic or Native American. It’s a gun rights stronghold, and to say residents are mostly conservative is putting it mildly.

But what surprised me this year was a painful public example of outright intolerance.

I don’t know Lance McDaniel, 64, well, but I’ve learned that he went to high school here, then left to grow a career and a family elsewhere in Arizona and California. When he moved back he felt a need to serve his community, so stepped up in 2018 to fill a vacancy on the school board. He says he soon realized he wasn’t fitting in, but things came to a head a few months ago.

It all began with pizza. McDaniel and others from a local church had been reading about how difficult it was for LGBTQ+ students to fit into middle school. So the group decided to show the kids that there were friendly people around by delivering free pizzas to three Rainbow Clubs established for LGBTQ+ students in the schools.

The group figured the kids needed community support, having read that several national surveys showed that “four out of five gay and lesbian students say they don’t know one supportive adult at school.”

As for the students, their reaction to the outside support for their get-togethers combined gratitude and relief: “It’s nice to have a place (to eat pizza) where we can hang out with no judgment,” said one student. “It’s nice to be able to talk with people my own age,” said another. McDaniel says it was clear that the kids liked the attention, “always thanking everyone involved” when the pizza showed up.

Somehow, though, as social media began telling the story, “pizza parties” of gender-fluid students were repeatedly mentioned in a negative way. It all came to a head when a virtual school board meeting was interrupted by people complaining loudly about these odd “pizza parties.” Worse, McDaniel and his family became the targets of threats and denunciations on social media.

Then last July, a petition to oust McDaniel from the school board began to circulate, with a recall election slated for February 16, 2021, if passed.

The petition charged that in several of his posts on social media about social justice, McDaniel had “... proven to be a poor role model for our children.” The petition added, “We need school board members that understand leadership and the power of mentoring, and know not to voice their personal, political, or social opinions that could influence children.” McDaniel told the local press that he stood by his social media posts. “My personal opinion is that (conservatives) have bullied us long enough, and that we don’t need to be quiet. If I see racism, I’ll point it out; if I see someone being oppressed, I’ll say something about it,” he said to local radio station KSJD.

McDaniel lost the recall by a two-to-one vote in an election that cost the school district \$21,000. He could have been voted out for free, as his appointed seat was up in November.

Still, this punitive recall failed to silence McDaniel’s voice. On social media, he still sticks up for the underdog and likes to share a quote from Charles Dickens: “Never...be mean in anything; never be false; never be cruel. Avoid those three vices...and (we) can always be hopeful.” And McDaniel and his church friends continue to drop off pizzas for kids at their Rainbow Clubs.

But there’s a new problem: Stories are circulating that the school board wants to close down the Rainbow Clubs. To head that off, some community members presented a petition to the board on May 11, asking for support of the clubs and the students who enjoy getting together.

Let’s let them eat pizza in peace.

Laura Roberts McHenry is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about Western issues. She says she wrote this column because “prejudice is hurting children and nothing could be worse than that.”