

Jim Yovino: Our Fresno community is what we make it

By Jim Yovino

There's a saying that bad things happen in threes. Since the beginning of the year, this seems to have a semblance of unfortunate truth for some children of our Valley. We lost 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez in a random drive-by shooting, three children almost died in a fire after being locked alone in their home and 16-year-old Brianna Ramirez of Parlier was shot in the eye by a stray bullet while riding in the car with her mom. This is only the short list of crimes involving children in the past handful of weeks.

Together we witness these horrific events and we ask ourselves, "Why?" We wonder, "What can I do to change things?" When no answer comes, we shake our heads and keep walking forward because to dwell too long in disbelief or sadness isn't possible.

As long as we remain one step removed, we think we're OK. We escaped unharmed. But, that's not true. This community is what we make it. Therefore, we need to slow down and think more deeply about how we can be part of positive change. It's the least we can do for the children of Fresno County.

Since taking the oath of office as the 21st Fresno County Superintendent of Schools in January, I've had the opportunity to continue my role as an advocate for the success of all of our children — in and out of the classroom. A common measurement of success in the classroom is academic achievement. But my belief as a life-long educator is that although good grades are important, building our children into kind, respectful and compassionate adults is the solution. Teaching our children lessons in civility and pride in our country will result in a new generation that does not accept violence and complacency as the norm.

To that end, I support efforts such as FCOE's Servant Leadership Academy. Now in its second year, the program, coordinated by our Student Intervention and Prevention Department, teaches a select group of 45 students from seven high schools throughout the county how to respect others by first starting with themselves.

This change is cultivated by monthly meetings with the group, teaching students interpersonal skills, team-building, cultural awareness and emotional intelligence. The ultimate goal is to create a more just and caring world by instilling in our students the idea of selflessness. A better person makes a better parent and citizen.

It's also never too late to change as parents, to become the stable and loving role models our children need. Our Parent Services Center conducts workshops for parents, empowering them to become advocates for their child's education and well-being. The center has successfully partnered with 13 school districts offering training classes and we believe that number will continue to grow.

These efforts aren't as effective if our children don't attend school. We cannot accept serial truancy because it short changes their ability to develop intellectually, emotionally and economically. It's impossible to create a community that cares about others when it's populated with adults who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and crime, which may have been averted by the strongest of remedies — education.

If bad things happen in threes, then we must do all we can to make good things our community expectation. You don't have to be an elected official like myself or a business leader or a law enforcement officer to have the influence to improve our county. Your voice as a parent, neighbor or citizen of this place we all call home is far more collectively powerful.

There is no upside to a senseless tragedy because a young life cut short is never justified. The only result we can hope for from such desolation is the unifying desire to become better. It is the call of our shared humanity, no matter

race or religion or politics, to step up and say, "Enough."

Begin with this. Remember back to the time when we all knew our neighbors. We didn't drive into our garage at the end of the day, lower the door and isolate ourselves. I'm guilty of this myself. Instead, we kept an eye out for the children of our neighborhood because we considered them part of our own family.

Call me old-fashioned, but there's a unity of spirit that comes from human connection as simple as saying hello, offering a smile or even coordinating a neighborhood potluck. Let's all show interest in the lives of others and be brave enough to become a catalyst of change, even if it's a small spark.

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