

## **Will Farmingville become a Synonym for Nativism?**

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Columbine, Colorado. Waco, Texas. Laramie, Wyoming. Farmingville in Suffolk County, where the home of Mexican immigrants was intentionally set on fire by a group of teenagers last July 4th, is in danger of joining these other American communities as a national synonym for irrational violence and bigotry. In this case, it risks becoming short-hand for nativism and violence directed at immigrants.

Each of these communities rejects the way they have been labeled by the media and are remembered by the public. Spokespersons argue that they are being blamed for aberrant behavior by disturbed individuals. They claim that hatred and bigotry are not part of their social climate. However, claims by these communities that "We are not responsible" ring hollow. In Farmingville, there is a history of violence directed at immigrants from Latin American countries and of the blatant use of racially hateful language.

Instead of serious and public introspection, a systematic campaign to root out and end bias, a warm welcome new immigrants, and counseling and other support services for troubled local teenagers, Suffolk County and local officials are scrambling to avoid scrutiny and divert blame. This is why hatemongers and alienated youth feel justified in what they do and why they believe they can escape punishment.

One of the things I find most alarming in Suffolk County today is the "THIS IS HORRIBLE, BUT. . ." response to the arson attack by public officials, local advocacy groups, and candidates for office.

Many of Suffolk County's elected leaders have contributed to the anti-immigrant climate by supporting cuts in funding for affirmative action programs and advocating for a bill that would require all county business be conducted only in English. Every time public officials make statements calling for restrictions on the rights of immigrants, they give license to those who want to take direct action in support of these positions.

Community residents have accused the district attorney's office of making an example of attackers because they do not know what to do about the real problem, an invasion of their community by Mexican day laborers. Efforts to minimize the seriousness of this attack, ignore the events of the past few years, shift the blame from the perpetrators to the victims, and will precipitate future horrors.

An interview by former Senator Alphonse D'Amato of Bill Cunningham (Newsday, September 3, 2003), who is seeking the Democratic nomination for Suffolk County chief executive, underscores the magnitude of anti-immigrant bias on Long Island. Instead of denouncing the violence and bigotry, D'Amato declared that "one of the great controversies is the problem of the undocumented aliens . . ." In response, after decrying the arson attack, Cunningham emphasized that he did not favor illegal immigration and discussed how the problem of having "hundreds of men on street corners looking for work" was "unfair to the people in Farmingville" because it caused property values to decline. D'Amato and Cunningham should not have coupled the problem of anti-immigrant violence with these other issues. Both did this because they fear alienating supporters of their political parties.

As the associate director of the New York State Great Irish Famine curriculum guide (available at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/nysssa/gif/index.html>), I participated in developing and field-testing document-based instructional material that help students in grades 4 to 12 compare the experience of Irish immigrants to the United States in the first half of the 19th century with the experience of immigrants today. Americans are notorious for their short historical memory. A number of political cartoons from the era portray the Irish as ape-like, simpletons or drunken fiends. They were undesirable, unassimilatable, immigrants who were undermining American institutions. Sound familiar? Students in Long Island schools who examined the cartoons quickly identified stereotypes directed at a new generation of immigrants arriving in America today.

Maureen Murphy, the director of the curriculum project, and I use the Great Irish Famine to introduce students to a number of essential questions that are still confronting us. What happens when bias and stereotyping are tolerated in a community? What exactly are the responsibilities of individuals when bad things are happening to other people? What are the responsibilities of the media, community and nation when there is suffering and social inequality?

The Great Irish Famine curriculum encourages students to thoughtfully consider both the causes of major social problems and individual and collective responses. It also encourages them to become active citizens committed to democracy and justice. If Farmingville, Suffolk County and Long Island, are to avoid becoming national synonyms for irrational violence and bigotry directed at immigrants, our entire community must learn lessons from the past, acknowledge, confront and overcome our prejudices, and start the process of building a more just society.