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A Letter from Hillsborough

Dorothy Potter Snyder

7-9 minutes

Fairy tales aren't child's play: they try to make sense of why terrible, ugly things happen in the world. The deliberately flat characters allow everyone to see themselves in the story and learn lessons about how to survive the savagery of life.

American [fairy-tale](#) writer, scholar, and editor [Kate Bernheimer](#) writes in the introduction to her collection of contemporary fairy-tales [*My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me*](#): "[T]he fairy-tale world is a real world. Fairy tales contain a spell that is not false: an invocation to protect those most endangered on this earth."

On the list of the endangered are people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, refugees, children, the elderly, and the disabled. Last month, in Hillsborough, North Carolina, once upon a time was now.

Matthew Shepherd, a gay chocolatier, qualifies for a spot on the endangered list. These are tough times for an artisanal sweet shop in a small southern town: rents are high, utilities

and the prices of raw materials inch ever upwards, and it's not every day that folks are willing to drop a couple of bills on a bonbon.

But then things became even harder: every Saturday, Confederate flaggers from Alamance crossed the county line to demonstrate at a corner in the heart of the downtown. Battle flags aloft, they stood like grave sentinels steps away from Matthew's bright, new shop door. They are still angry about [the Town Board of Commissioner's 2016 decision](#) to remove the words "Confederate Memorial" from what is now the county museum. (The United Dames of the Confederacy screwed those words to the facade when the building was erected in 1934 as a whites-only library.) The message from the UDC then and from the flaggers 85 years later: You will not replace us.

One Saturday, Matthew walked past the three men brandishing large Confederate flags on the corner and he rolled his eyes in irritation. One of them turned to him and said, "Boy in the pink shirt, why don't you go back to your chocolate shop?" Matthew fumed, and not just from the anti-gay jibe. Business was slow. His few customers didn't want to walk through the flaggers either.

So Matthew wrote, in chalk, on his outdoor sandwich board: "Burn a rebel flag, get free chocolate." (This is the part of the fairy tale when the protagonist makes a mistake.)

People tell the next part of the story differently. Police came and suggested (or insisted) that he remove his sign. Either the

police favored the flaggers' First Amendment rights over Matthew's — or they did their level best to defuse a tense situation. And then, again, facts are hard to pin down: either the protestors aimed anti-gay slurs at Matthew — or, as one newspaper reported, it was the cops themselves. What's certain is that the flaggers threatened to "blow his house down" with a mass demonstration right in front of his shop the very next Saturday.

A flurry of posts appeared on a Facebook page frequented by flaggers, including a picture of the three men posing behind the chalkboard inscribed with what Matthew later called "my bad joke." Matthew's Chocolates' Facebook page was swamped with so many negative reviews, some from as far away as Texas, that the algorithms took notice and shut it down. A flagger-ally noted that Matthew's store is in an old, wooden building and posted a meme of a structure being consumed by flames. It would burn quickly, they wrote.



But then neighbors, customers, and local groups,

like [HPTA](#) and [The Real Silent Sam Coalition](#), responded. Connecting via Messenger, they quickly organized an occupation of all four corners near the chocolate shop for the coming Saturday. The rally was to include a small sousaphone-led band, tutus, multicolored plastic Hawaiian-style leis, anti-hate posters, rainbow flags, and #BLM signs. And indeed, when the day arrived, they outnumbered the flaggers roughly ten to one. The four corners of Hillsborough's main intersection across the street from the County courthouse was alive with bright color and music. The carnival atmosphere drew smiles and thumbs-up from passersby. They were not protesting *against* anyone; they were voting *for* their neighbor.



Image courtesy of the author



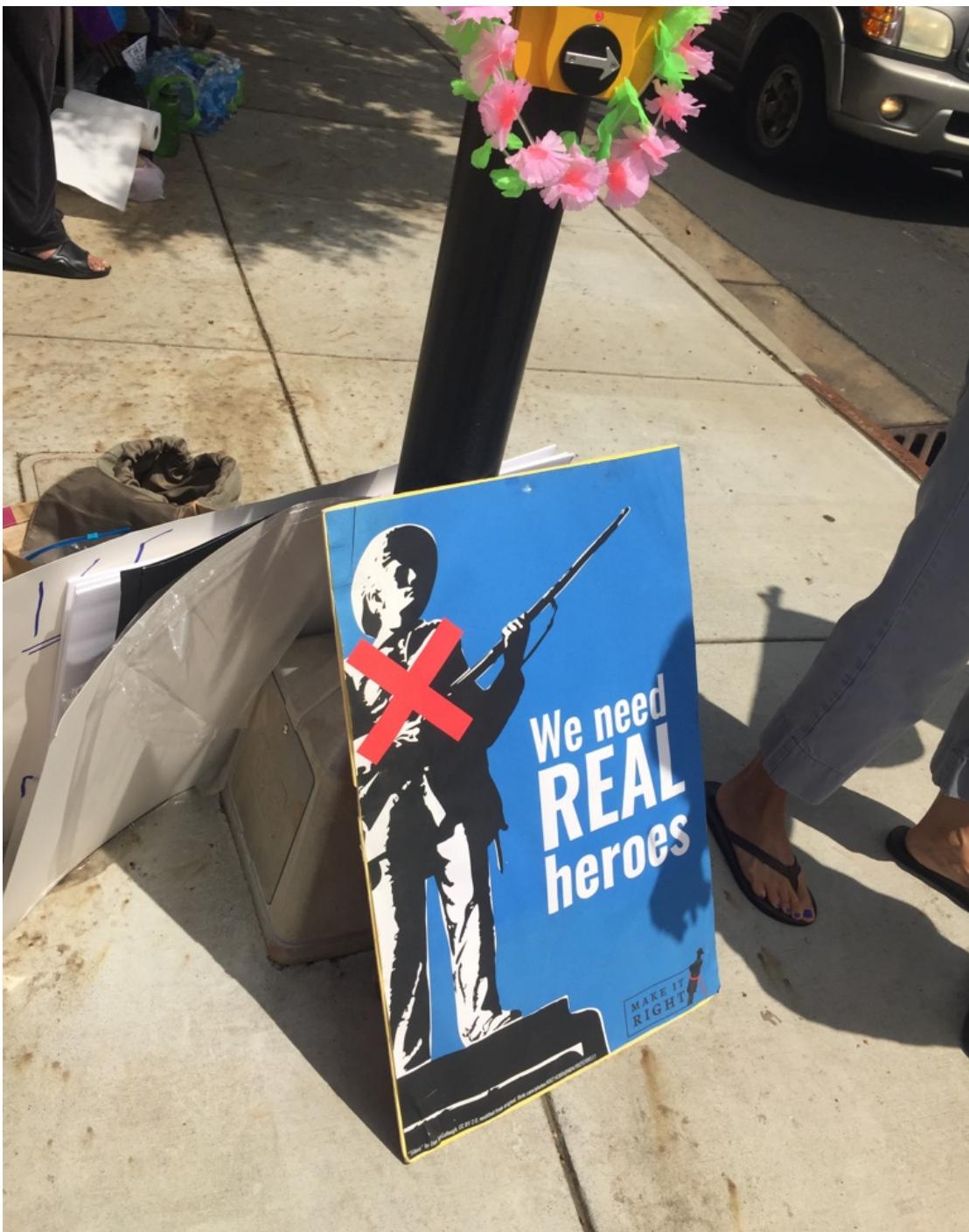


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As I participated in this celebratory occupation, I spoke with Horace, an African American man who grew up on the block

where I now live. I asked him what Hillsborough was like in the 1960s when he was coming up. “You know, I integrated the schools here,” he said. “My first day of sixth grade, the teacher asked me ‘You want us to call you Negro or N***er?’ Can you imagine?” I could not imagine. I should not have been surprised, though: North Carolina schools [were not in full compliance](#) with Brown v. Board of Education until 1972.

The flaggers lurked on the periphery for a while, took photos of the brightly colored occupiers from the safety of their trucks (a common intimidation technique), and then dispersed. The occupiers hung out. We talked and had fun. We ate lots of gelato, cookies, and chocolate. And later that evening, Matthew posted on his website that he was sorry he would be unable to open his shop on Sunday: he’d sold out his entire stock.



Image courtesy of the author

And there the fairy-tale seems to end — the allies arrived; the endangered protagonist survived; the wolves slunk back into the forest — and reality reasserts itself. But we can't organize a carnival downtown every Saturday, can we? No. We can, however, emerge from the relative safety of the Internet and our houses, put on a tutu, and go in person to the public square to support our neighbors. We can choose love instead of hate. We can vote for our friends instead of against someone else. And, finally, we can employ a strategy of joy on the streets to protect the endangered members of our community. Wherever we are. All the time.

As the occupation was winding down, a reporter from WRAL-TV asked to interview me on camera about the event. I almost refused: I was not an organizer of the event and I was hesitant to develop further notoriety amongst the flagger community. But the tingle of apprehension I felt didn't overcome my desire to talk about how our civil strategy of joy had won the day. So I nodded yes, go ahead.

The young videographer turned on his camera. "How would you describe Hillsborough?"

"Hillsborough," I said, "is a neighborly town where all are welcome, and love is love is love is love is love..." The memory of [Lin Manuel Miranda's poem](#) after the Pulse nightclub shooting rose up in my throat and I felt like crying.

“Are you okay?” the reporter asked, solicitous. “Yeah,” I answered, taking a deep breath, “let’s go on.” I smiled and began again.

Neighbors in my small southern town spun straw into gold and transformed a display of hate into a party. This fairy tale, at least for now, had a happy ending.

Chocolate for everyone.

Dorothy Potter Snyder is a writer, editor and literary translator (Spanish). She helped pilot the first online synchronous online language program for the Foreign Language Department of The School of Undergraduate Studies. A former New Yorker, she now lives in Hillsborough, NC.

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