

Hailey Owens Press Conference

Last week, the entire city of Springfield was stunned by an event that was so random and so violent that it violated all our deeply-held definitions of a civil community.

The kidnapping and death of ten-year-old Hailey Owens triggered within our city an outpouring of shock, anger and grief. Tears were never very far from the surface for many of us that evening and into the following days. Many, many of us gave our children and grandchildren an extra tight hug that evening. And, for some of us, if our children no longer live here in town, it was an evening of very emotional telephone calls.

But in the way that Springfield folks react to adversity, we reacted. Within hours, a fund for funeral expenses had been set up at Empire Bank. An informal and impromptu place of mourning was created at the place where Hailey was kidnapped with people leaving notes and mementoes. A grass-roots effort to organize a Candlelight Vigil this past Saturday on Commercial Street began and grew into a huge event.

And a world-wide movement to turn porch lights on for Hailey rapidly circled around the globe through social media. I know my daughters in Kansas and Colorado had their porch lights on, as did my sister who lives in Europe—all mourning for Hailey Owens, her family, and for what their home town was going through.

The Candlelight March Saturday evening truly provided an opportunity for our community to experience a needed time of catharsis. Because of how rapidly the events unfolded last Wednesday and Thursday, our community really did not have the opportunity to move through the several stages of grief. Many of us have been stuck at the second level of anger and this march in honor of Hailey Owens gave us the chance to dissipate that anger and grief and begin thinking about how to move forward. With upwards of 10,000 people walking and lighting candles to show support for Hailey's family, this speaks volumes about the kind of city we are.

Springfield is a community of 160,000 people and, if 99 ½ % of us are good people—and I sincerely believe we are—that still leaves 800

bad people out there. Sadly, Hailey Owens encountered one of those last week. So, as we move from considering ourselves living in a large small town to living in a small city, we will have to change some of our assumptions. Springfield is not Mayberry.

I want to thank Chief Williams and his entire police department for the quick reaction time and the professional investigation of this crime. Within three and a half hours of the 911 call, a suspect was in custody. That was not, unfortunately, in time for Hailey Owens.

The witnesses who obtained the license numbers and the color and make of the vehicle were a tremendous asset to the investigation. They have set the bar for personal involvement at a new level and we very much thank them.

A huge thank you must be extended from the community to the folks on C-Street who hosted the Candlelight Vigil and kept it reverent and civil. C-Street today is not the same as the Commercial Street of 15-20 years ago and a lot of our own local people learned that Saturday evening.

And I also want to say something that you don't often hear from people in the political realm. I want to sincerely thank our local reporters and editors for the professional and respectful way in which they have covered this very difficult story. Their professionalism stood in stark contrast to that of the reporters who arrived in Springfield from out of town venues. It was very noticeable and very much appreciated by those of us who deal with reporters and editors daily.

Springfield now needs to make a decision. We can either allow ourselves to be defined by this senseless act of violence or we can take steps to define our community by acts of kindness, by acts of protection, and by an increasing involvement in making our city a better community for those children who have to live with this terrible story.

There are agencies and programs throughout our city that need our involvement. The Every Child Promise works to increase children's readiness for kindergarten. Big Brothers and Big Sisters of the Ozarks has a waiting list for Big Brothers. This means there are a number of boys who are waiting for someone to step up to be a friend. The

Northside Betterment Association works every year to help increase school attendance for north Springfield schools. They are always looking for additional members. The list goes on and on and there are many needs in our community.

There are plenty of victims to go around. From Hailey Owens to her family to the parents of the person accused of this terrible crime, our thoughts and prayers go out to all of them. However, if we truly want to honor the memory of Hailey Owens, we can do that by helping the young people in our city. As a community, we need to make a commitment to feed them, to teach them, and to protect them. If we make this long-lasting commitment today and moving into the future, then Hailey's legacy will be one of beauty and love.

Thank you. I'll try to respond to any questions.