

Opinion

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Bridging our community divide

There is a growing sense of a divide in America.

A divide between the educated and those without access to higher education; between those with ample food on the table each night and those whose next meal is uncertain; between those who are citizens and those who are undocumented; between those who are among the working poor and the wealthy.

We have a choice to watch this divide fracture further or to work to bridge it. The Social Justice Fund for Ventura County works to build bridges in our community.

History has shown that a thriving middle class is associated with both prosperity and stability. The middle-class economic engine has, time and again, provided the disposable income to power our economy and to satisfy the aspirations of those who work hard for their families.

In fact, the two ends of the spectrum, wealthy or poor, hungry or fed, need each other and have an interest in coming closer together. Granted, this may not be apparent or welcome but the fact is we are in this world together and we will go further with each other than by fighting each other. We can build bridges.

**BRYAN
MCQUEENEY**

GUEST COLUMNIST

Primitive bridges predate the earliest civilizations. They provided then and they provide now a means to overcome obstacles, valleys and rivers. Bridges can be stunningly simple — a hand extended in support as you scramble on a fallen tree over a stream — or stunningly complex, requiring years of planning and intimate knowledge of the surrounding environment.

A bridge is a time honored way of bringing two lands or communities together. And, building a bridge is best done from both sides of a chasm, working toward a carefully plotted meeting in the middle.

The bridges we build in our community can be as simple as an outstretched hand offering support at a crucial moment or as complex as a partnership involving the community, nonprofits and government agencies over the span of a generation.

The Social Justice Fund is actively working to bridge the divide in our community. It is an 8-year-old organization, which has raised and then invested more than \$350,000 in

immigration, sustainable transportation, access to higher education, youth leadership and many other causes that advance opportunity and justice for all.

We connect farmworker women, marriage-equality advocates, affluent donors, veterans of the civil rights movement, environmental activists, farmers and immigrant youth. We connect people, organizations and movements by creating a conversation about justice, developing young leaders and funding a growing community of grass-roots groups.

Our grants program supports activists in Oxnard, Fillmore and across Ventura County to improve access to safe streets and parks, transportation and a clean environment, fight for wage equity and farmworker justice and to develop the next generation of young leaders.

The Social Justice Fund is advancing the conversation on justice. We amplify the voices of those most affected by injustice and we explain the economic, environmental and racial issues facing Ventura County.

We foster collaborative activism connecting donors, activists and the professionals working to improve the lives of those who live in our shadows.

And we invest in local, innovative and motivating social change efforts often focusing on our youth, the next generation of leaders.

Next Sunday, May 4, nearly 200 donors, activists and advocates will gather at the historic Camarillo Ranch House for a fundraising brunch that will explore these themes. Actor and activist Martin Sheen will provide the keynote remarks and the fund's executive director Angeles Small will discuss social justice in Ventura County.

A few years ago, a young Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousafzai, was targeted because of her advocacy for girls and education. Her concern was for those who could not be heard, the people in her community. In her words, "I raise my voice not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard."

The Social Justice Fund is laying a careful foundation, on both sides of a divide that will build a bridge for all people, heard and unheard, to last for generations. To learn more, go to www.socialjusticefundvc.org.

Bryan McQueeney is the treasurer of the Social Justice Fund for Ventura County and the executive director of Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship.